



A BLAZING CONNECTION

EVELYN BOYETT

THE CLEAN AND WHOLESOME

A Blazing Connection

A Clean Western Historical Romance Novel

Evelyn Boyett

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Chapter 1

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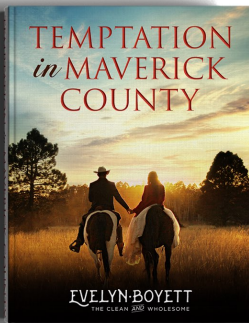
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Leah stood alone in the kitchen, her frow burrowed as she stared through the window. It had been yet another largely sleepless night spent tossing and turning, her stomach churning.

As she had been ever since her parents died, Leah was worried to death about what was going to become of her and her kid sister, Evangeline.

She worked hard, six and even sometimes seven days a week down at the factory as she tried to make ends meet. But those ends only seemed to be growing further and further apart.

In the dark of the night and the small hours of the morning, Leah had to admit that it felt like too much on her shoulders. She was struggling. No, if she was truthful with herself, she would say she was failing.

She felt like a woman drowning beneath debt and obligation, and she wasn't providing for her sister. She was barely twenty years old.

More times than not, Evangeline went to bed with her stomach still growling. But what could Leah do?

Her eyes glistened with tears as she stared at the world beyond the window. The city of Boston was still wrapped in the gloom of night, but the horizon was beginning to lighten.

Fingers of pink and purple stretched across a sky that was gradually moving from black to gray, and as Leah leaned against the counter, she felt the tears rolling down her cheeks. Tears of grief for her parents and tears of frustration for herself.

She quickly wiped her face. She didn't have time to feel sorry for herself. Leah needed to figure out how to get them out of the terrible spiral they were trapped in.

Aside from the house they lived in, her parents hadn't left them much else—except for debt.

She didn't know how their family had gotten by when it seemed like they were living on the brink of financial ruin. Her parents seemed to owe money to everybody in Boston.

Leah brought in very little from her job at the factory, and most of that went to help pay down the debts. That left even less for things like food.

Her stomach growled, as if to remind her that she'd had almost nothing to eat for the past couple of days. She tried to not think about it. Thinking about it only made the hunger pangs worse.

And that only made her feel all the more terrible about their situation, since Leah knew Evangeline was just as hungry.

But her sister never complained about it. Nor did she ever make Leah feel bad about their circumstance.

“You need to sleep once in a while, Leah.”

She turned to see Evangeline stepping into the kitchen, rubbing her eyes and yawning. Her hair stood out in a hundred different directions and she had a glazed, sleepy look on her face.

“I slept. I just woke up a little while ago,” she lied.

Evangeline looked at her closely, obviously hearing the untruth in Leah’s words, but she didn’t contradict her. Leah’s sister was intelligent—smarter than other girls her age.

She’d heard other people call Evangeline “precocious,” and Leah thought that was a fair assessment.

It broke her heart to know that Evangeline was having to grow up fast, that she wasn’t allowed to be a child but instead had to worry about things only adults should have to be concerned with.

“Did I wake you?” Leah asked.

Evangeline shook her head. “No. I just woke up.”

Leah gave her a gentle smile, then used the hand pump to pour her sister a cup of water. She handed it to Evangeline and watched as she took a long swallow.

“Drink it all down,” Leah said.

She often gave Evangeline large cups of water to drink, knowing it would help fill her belly when there was little food in the pantry. She suspected Evangeline, being as perceptive as she was, knew it, but was good enough to not say anything.

She was a good girl like that. Leah hated that she had to be.

“Thank you,” Evangeline said, handing the cup back to her. “I should get ready for school.”

“Would you like some warm water to bathe?”

She shook her head. “No, I’ll just use what I have in my wash basin.”

“But it will be freezing.”

Evangeline smiled, showing off the gap where she’d lost some of her baby teeth. “Cold water always helps me wake up.”

“Yeah, me too,” Leah replied.

Evangeline returned to her room to prepare herself for the day. Leah turned back to the window and watched as the sun crested the horizon, casting the land around them in golden hues.

She knew she’d have to get ready for work soon but wanted to fix her sister something to eat before they got started for the day.

Leah walked into the cold room and let out a sigh as she looked at the empty shelves that surrounded her. As difficult as things had been when her parents were still alive, Leah had never seen the shelves in the cold room so empty.

Her eyes fell on the lone plate on the shelf. She took off the cloth cover and when she saw nothing more than a single slice of bread, she felt the tears well in her eyes.

She fought them off and wiped them away, determined to not let

Evangeline see them.

She didn't want her sister to worry about her. All she wanted Evangeline to have to worry about was getting her education and being a kid.

Leah picked up the plate and carried it inside. She slathered a thick layer of butter onto the bread and drizzled a little of their remaining honey over that, setting the plate down on the small table.

At least her sister would have something to put in her belly before she went to school.

Leah turned and pumped out a cup of water for herself. She drank it down, then drank another. And one more for good measure, feeling the water sloshing around in her belly.

It wasn't the same as food, but at least it felt full. Kind of.

Evangeline came out of her room nicely dressed, with her hair pulled back and tied with a green silk ribbon she had been given by their mother on her last birthday.

She sat down at the table and looked at the slice of bread on her plate. Evangeline's smile faltered slightly when she saw only the one plate and she looked up at Leah.

"Are you not eating?" she asked.

Leah gave her little sister her best smile. "I'm fine. I already ate."

Evangeline looked at her closely, clearly trying to decide whether or not to believe her. Leah suspected her little sister knew she was

lying, but Evangeline put on a brave face and smiled for her as she picked up the slice of bread.

“Thank you,” she said.

“Of course. Now, eat up while I get ready for work,” Leah replied, giving her little sister a smile. “We should be going soon.”

She walked out of the kitchen and down the hall to her bedroom, trying to ignore both the water sloshing around in her belly and the gnawing hunger that was eating away at her.

1

6 Years Ago...

“She was such a lovely person,” Mr. Perkins, the owner of the town mercantile, said.

Mrs. Whiting, one of the teachers at the small school in town, nodded. “Always so kind and compassionate. She’s going to be missed.”

Ten-year-old Edgar Thompson stood beside his mother’s grave, clutching a white rose in his small fist. Fighting off the tears that welled in his eyes, Edgar looked at the crude wooden box that held her, listening to the people around him talking.

They spoke as if they didn’t see him, didn’t realize he was standing right there.

Thunder rumbled in the distance and a light sprinkle fell from the slate gray clouds overhead. To Edgar, the weather seemed perfectly suited to not just the somber tone of the day, but to his mood as well.

“I can’t believe Amon didn’t come to his own wife’s funeral,” he

heard somebody else say.

“I’m not surprised. I always thought Geraldine was too good for him,” another woman, old Mrs. Turner, said. “He was never as kind or caring as she was.”

It was one of the only advantages of being a kid—people tended to overlook him or just forget he was there. Not because he wanted to eavesdrop on them, but because he sometimes preferred not being seen at all.

This was one of those times.

He focused his attention on the pine box in front of him, doing his best to be invisible. But while he managed to keep everybody else’s focus off him, he couldn’t shut out their voices.

There were many, and they were saying some terrible things. And try as he might, Edgar couldn’t not hear what they were saying.

“What kind of man don’t attend his own wife’s funeral?”

“That ain’t a man. That’s a coward.”

“He’s a coward, all right. Yellow as a lemon, that one is.”

“I don’t see how Geraldine could have married a man like that in the first place.”

“Or stayed with him as long as she did.”

“Your lips to God’s ears.”

The town priest, Father Morgan, stepped to the head of the grave

and everybody else quickly quieted down. Edgar could have told them where his father was and why he wasn't there with them today, but he didn't want to contribute to the poor opinion people already had of him.

It wasn't because his father didn't care. It wasn't because he didn't love his mother. It was because Edgar's father had loved his mother and cared too much.

Like so many of the other people from town, Edgar had often wondered what it was that kept them together. They were very different people. Even at his young age, Edgar was able to see it.

His mother was outgoing and pleasant to be around, kind and compassionate to everybody she met. His mother was well loved in town and among the people.

His father, on the other hand, was considered cold and aloof. He did not engage with the townspeople and held himself apart from them.

It wasn't that his father disliked anybody. But he was a private man, a bit shy. He had a difficult time meeting new people and so, he preferred not to.

He rarely went into town with Edgar's mother, especially when it came to social engagements. His father was just different.

And his father had taken the death of his wife hard. Edgar had never seen his father in such a state before and it frightened him.

What is his father never pulled out of it? What if his father was never the same and simply stayed in this deep, dark hole he was stuck in?

Edgar tried to listen to Father Morgan talking about his mother, tried to listen to the service. But he couldn't stop staring at the box before him.

He'd seen his mother before they'd nailed the box shut and she'd looked so peaceful. She seemed like she was only sleeping, and Edgar had had to resist the urge to reach out and shake her, had to stop himself from grabbing her by the shoulder and trying to wake her.

He felt a tear spill from the corner of his eye and race down his cheek. A dark part of Edgar's mind thought about how his mother would look a month from now. A year from now.

He had seen some of his father's livestock decomposing in the fields before, their carcasses baking in the warm sun, and he wondered if the same thing would happen to his mother. If, after a year, she'd be nothing more than a pile of bones, too.

He shouldn't be having thoughts like those. They were morbid and wrong. But he couldn't help it.

He'd never lost somebody he loved before and the pain was unbearable. But he was also a young boy with an active imagination, and he sometimes indulged in the dark, ghoulish side of his nature.

It took him a moment to realize Father Morgan had stopped speaking. He looked around and saw that everybody was looking at him. Edgar felt his cheeks flush with embarrassment.

He had never enjoyed being the center of attention and he liked it even less now, at his mother's funeral.

He silently cursed himself for allowing his mind to wander. It did that sometimes in school, too, and his mother had always gotten onto him about that.

Father Morgan gave him a patient smile. “Son, was there anything you’d like to say about your mother? A fond remembrance you’d like to share?”

Edgar felt his heart race as his mouth grew dry. He felt all the eyes on him and shrank back from it, tried to make himself small and invisible as everybody stared at him expectantly.

Edgar didn’t know what to say. He had no words. This was supposed to be his father’s job—saying goodbye to his mother.

And for the first time, Edgar felt a tendril of resentment wrap itself around his heart and squeeze so tight, it drove the breath from his lungs.

“That’s all right,” Father Morgan said. “She knows what’s in your heart.”

The priest turned to the crowd of mourners around the grave and continued on with his sermon. He finished up a few minutes later and the townspeople murmured their words of condolences to him as they filed away from the grave, leaving him on his own.

And when they were all gone and he was truly alone, Edgar let the tears flow down his face. He dropped to his knees beside the casket and sobbed.

Only when he was done and felt like he had no more tears to cry did he get to his feet. He used the sleeve of his jacket to wipe the tears from his face and sniffed loudly.

“I miss you so much, Ma. I miss you every day,” he said, his voice quavering. “I’m going to miss you every day for the rest of my life.”

In that moment, Edgar would have given anything—he would have traded his own life—just to hear his mother say his name one more time. Just to hear one more piece of advice, or one of those homespun stories she liked to tell when she was trying to make a point.

He would have traded anything in the world to hear her tell him that she loved him. But he knew he would never hear those words again.

He would never feel her embrace him or kiss him on the forehead like she did when she was trying to make him feel better. He would no longer hear her laughter, smell her perfume, or even hear her scold him. He would have done anything to hear her chastise him one last time.

“I love you, Ma.”

Edgar kissed the petals of the rose in his hand and gently laid it on the casket, then turned and started the walk home.

He walked through the barn and made sure to feed and water the horses penned inside. Edgar wasn’t surprised that his father hadn’t managed to come out of the house to see to the chores.

He hadn’t since the day Edgar’s mother died, and things around the family ranch were starting to back up.

Edgar sighed. Unless his father snapped out of his stupor, he was going to have to keep the ranch running himself. He looked around and saw the fields needed to be plowed and readied for planting.

There was an order he was supposed to go in. His father didn't use the same fields two growing seasons in a row, but he wasn't sure which ones were ready for planting and which to leave fallow.

He was going to need to milk the cows in the morning and shoe the horses. There were a thousand chores that were going to need to be done if this ranch was going to stay afloat.

And if his father wasn't going to do them, the burden would fall to Edgar. But he didn't know how he was going to do all the work around the ranch and keep up with his schooling.

For the first time, Edgar realized that if his father didn't pull out of this downward spiral into darkness he was stuck in, Edgar was going to have to quit school to work the ranch.

The only other option would be to let the ranch fail. He didn't understand what that would mean, but he was fairly certain it meant they would lose the house.

As he thought about it, the flame of resentment already burning inside of him grew a little brighter. A little hotter.

His heart heavy, his mind swirling with thoughts he knew a ten-year-old boy shouldn't need to be having, he crossed the yard and walked up the steps that led to the porch. Inside, he pulled off the dark jacket as he crossed the threshold and hung it on the peg beside the door.

He reached out and ran his fingers down his mother's shawl,

fighting off a fresh wave of tears as the realization that he'd never see her wear it again settled down over him once more.

His father was exactly where he imagined he would be—sitting in the rocker before a cold hearth, a bottle of brown liquor in his hand, staring at the ashes. The resentment he'd been feeling ebbed and a rush of pity flowed in, filling Edgar's heart.

His father's face was drawn. Pale. He hadn't shaved in days and his beard was growing in thick and scraggly. He also hadn't bathed or changed clothes in days, either, and was beginning to stink.

He couldn't imagine what was going through his father's mind or heart in that moment. But the look of pain and loss etched into his features was so poignant, it killed any desire Edgar had to tear into the man for his current state.

"How was the funeral?"

His father had barely spoken since his mother died and the sound of his voice startled Edgar. He hadn't expected that his father would say anything.

"It—it was nice, Pa," he replied.

"Did that preacher give some good words?"

Edgar nodded. "He did. He said a lot of nice things."

"How about them people from town?"

"Everybody said how much they were going to miss her."

His father nodded and took a long pull from his bottle and Edgar

noticed his eyes were shimmering. He'd seen his father's eyes take on that glassy, wet look when he got too deep in his cups, but this was different.

He'd never in his life seen his father cry, but he looked to be on the verge of it in that moment. It was then that Edgar realized just how devastated his father was by the loss of his mother, and he felt his heart breaking.

"How about them people from town? I bet they said some pretty ugly things about me not bein' there, huh?"

Edgar considered telling him the truth, that they'd called him cruel and even cowardly for not being at the funeral. His father certainly seemed to be expecting it.

But why kick the man while he was down? His father was looking for confirmation of what a terrible person and how unworthy of his mother's love he was. His father wanted to punish himself.

"No," Edgar lied. "Most everybody I talked to understood why you couldn't be there. And they all said for me to tell you how sorry they were for your loss."

His father seemed to consider that for a moment, but Edgar saw the moment he rejected that sympathy. There was a hardness around his eyes and a tightening of his jaw that was unmistakable.

He took another swallow of his liquor and settled back into his chair, saying nothing more about that. He obviously didn't get what he was looking for.

"Make me a fire, Edgar. It's gettin' cold in here."

“Yes, Pa.”

Edgar started for the door, but his father’s voice stopped him. He turned back, but his father’s gaze remained fixed on the cold, empty hearth.

“I’m sorry about your Ma, boy. You deserve better than me.”

Edgar didn’t know what to say to that, so he remained silent for a long moment, thinking that his father might say more. But he didn’t.

“I’m sorry about Ma, too, Pa,” Edgar said.

“Can I give you a piece of advice, son?”

“Of course, Pa.”

“Don’t ever let yourself fall in love,” he said. “It only ends in heartache. Believe me, you don’t want to feel what I’m feelin’ right now. Not ever.”

“Sure, Pa,” Edgar replied, then turned and walked out of the house to fetch the wood for a fire, remembering something his mother had once told him.

There’s only one true source of happiness in this life, Edgar: to love and be loved. So, find yourself a woman who fills your heart with joy, grab onto her, and don’t ever let her go. Not ever, and not for anything.

P

resent Day...

The hot sun beat down on him mercilessly. Edgar nailed the final planks onto the porch of the new bunkhouse he'd just built and stood up, stretching out his back.

He was only twenty-six, but there were days he felt twice that. He took off his Stetson and mopped his brow with a handkerchief, then stuffed it into his back pocket.

“What do ya need another bunkhouse for, boss?”

Edgar turned and found himself staring at his ranch hand, Alberto, standing there with a wide grin on his face.

Alberto helped him with the day-to-day running of the ranch. He'd hired him a couple of years back when his father simply became too frail to work the land.

It had taken almost a year, but his father had finally found his way out of his grief and gotten back to working the ranch.

By that time, though, Edgar had quit school and had done a

passable job of keeping the ranch running. Working together with his father had helped it grow by leaps and bounds.

The ranch was making very good money now and although his father was doing better, he still had never truly recovered from the death of his mother. He'd never gotten back to being the same man.

He was even more withdrawn than he ever had been and drank far too much, far too regularly.

His father's condition had necessitated the hiring of a hand to help around the ranch, and a friend of Edgar's had recommended Alberto. Edgar was grateful. Alberto was a tireless worker.

He was careful, thoughtful, efficient, and loyal. And he knew a lot about ranch work.

Alberto was about ten years older than Edgar and had worked ranches most of his adult life, so Edgar had been able to learn a lot about running a ranch from the older man. It was good, since his father had been next to useless when it came to teaching him those things.

"Well, you never know when you'll need a bunkhouse," Edgar said.

"Yeah, well, you'll need it when you hire some more hands. Which we could use."

"Yeah, maybe one day soon."

"You know, you've been saying that same thing for about two years now," Alberto noted with a chuckle. "It's always one day soon with you. Just so you know, one day we're going to run fresh

out of ‘one day soon.’”

Edgar smiled and nodded.

“I know, I know,” he replied. “I just want to be sure I can afford it before I take on another hand. The last thing I want to do is hire somebody, then have to let them go a month later just because things are tight.”

“That’s fair,” Alberto said. “Anyway, I’m goin’ out to the west field. I need to round up some cattle and move ‘em onto the east field.”

“All right. When I finish up here, I’ll come out and help.”

Alberto waved him off. “Don’t worry about it. I can handle this,” he said. “You go ahead and build another bunkhouse we’ll never use.”

Edgar grinned and shook his head as he watched the man walk off laughing. The truth of the matter was that Edgar was building this bunkhouse for his father to move into.

It was time his father moved out of the house and into a space of his own. Amon might appreciate a place where he could do whatever he wanted without interruption or judgment. A place he could call his own.

Besides, Edgar had plans. He’d long desired a wife and had always planned on having a passel of children of his own one day. And he’d decided that day was coming up. Soon.

Edgar spent all day working hard, be it mending fences, chasing down wayward cattle, or working in the one field where he still planted crops—he’d learned there was better money to be had in

cattle ranching, so he'd converted most of the land into grazing fields but kept one for crops.

Those were mostly for his own use, though.

He worked hard all day, every day. And for what? To come home and spend the night alone?

Being alone was a staple of his life for all of his twenty-six years, but there were nights when the loneliness he felt was almost too much to bear. Somewhere along the way, he had become more like his father than he'd ever intended—or wanted.

Reclusive and cold—he knew those were words people in town used about him. In their minds, he was his father's son. But he'd always wanted to be considered to be more like his mother.

He wanted to be as well regarded and liked as his mother had been. He wanted people in town to think of him as warm and compassionate. Kind. He wanted to be loved as she had been.

Maybe it was selfish, but Edgar wanted to be considered part of his mother's legacy, rather than his father's. It was important to him.

And having a wife and a family might go a long way toward doing that for him. It might help draw him out of the self-imposed exile he existed in.

Without ever meaning to, though, he'd allowed his father's influence to creep into his life. He'd drawn inward, rather than let himself embrace the town he'd spent his entire life in.

But a family of his own could help change that course. Or, as his mother used to say regarding his father, a good woman could help

domesticate him.

As he thought of her words, Edgar couldn't help but smile. There wasn't a day that went by, even still, that he didn't think of her. That he didn't miss her.

Even though she'd been gone sixteen years now, she was still a large presence in his life. Everything Edgar did, he did with the hope that she was proudly looking down on him.

Her approval was still something he sought, and even though he knew she wasn't there to speak those words to him, he thought he would know she was proud of him all the same.

The sun had crept high in the sky and Edgar wanted a break. He put his tools down and walked over to the massive oak tree that dominated the center of the yard.

It sat halfway between the house and the barn, its long, leafy boughs providing a wide circle of shade he'd always enjoyed on those warm afternoons. He would often take a break beneath the tree, sometimes even napping, during the hottest part of the afternoon.

He sat down with a groan and leaned back against the wide, thick trunk, reveling in the cool shade. It was still warm, of course, but not having the sun beating down on him directly felt nice.

He leaned back and pulled his Stetson down over his eyes, intending to take a short nap before getting on with some much needed repairs to the barn.

"Mr. Edgar, wake up please."

Edgar pushed his hat back on his brow and stared into the smiling face of Cecilia. She was a short, portly woman he'd hired to care for the house—meaning he'd hired her to clean up and look after his father.

She had dark hair flecked with gray, wide dark eyes, and a soft round face. She always seemed to be smiling and had a jovial nature he particularly enjoyed. Her rare wisdom meant he never lacked for good advice.

"I wasn't really asleep, Cecilia," he said. "I was just resting my eyes."

"Oh. It must have been a squirrel in the tree making that horrible snoring, then," she replied with a wide grin on her face.

Edgar felt his cheeks flush. He hadn't realized he'd fallen asleep, nor did he know for how long.

He sat up and let her set the tray she was carrying down in his lap. He looked down at a plate that was heaped with food.

"You work too hard. You need to keep your strength up," she said, her voice colored by her thick Mexican accent.

"I don't think I work too hard. I mean, I was just nappin', wasn't I?"

She frowned at him the way his mother used to when he said something she disagreed with. He chuckled to himself, then inhaled deeply.

"Lunch smells amazing, as usual. Thank you, Cecilia."

“Of course. Is my pleasure, Mr. Edgar.”

His mouth watered and his stomach grumbled as he looked at the shredded meat, Mexican rice, red beans, salsa, and fresh baked tortillas.

A tall glass of cold lemonade stood on the tray as well and he took a long swallow of it first. As he set the glass down, he looked up at Cecilia.

He hadn't told anybody what his plans were, but he was growing more excited about them and felt like he might burst if he didn't tell somebody.

“Can you keep a secret, Cecilia?”

“Si, Mr. Edgar. I am good at keeping secrets.”

“I think it's time I marry.”

Her eyes widened, but a smile crossed her face. “I think so, too. Marriage is good for you. There is too much sadness here.

“I think a marriage would bring some happiness and light to this ranch. Much needed happiness. And having kids would be good for you.”

“That's what I thought, too. I know my mother would have wanted me to marry and start a family,” he said.

“She used to talk about it when she was alive—even though I was only a child myself. She said she couldn't wait to be a grandmother.”

Cecilia smiled. "Your mother sounds like a good woman. I wish I could have met her."

A wan smile touched Edgar's lips. "I do, too. She was a great woman," he said. "And I think she'd approve of what I'm goin' to do."

"What are you going to do, Mr. Edgar?"

"I'm going to put an ad in one of those mail-order bride catalogs," he said.

She eyed him closely. "You're going to find a wife in a catalog?"

He nodded. "I don't have time for a normal courtship. Not to mention the fact that I barely know anybody in town anymore. I think this is the best way to do it."

She pursed her lips, considering him for a moment. "But you think you will love this woman from a catalog?"

"I think love takes work. It takes time. It's not an instant thing, but if two people are willing to try, love can bloom," he replied. "At least, that's what my mother used to say."

"She said she and my father didn't love each other at first, either, but look at him—he's been utterly lost without her. A shell of himself."

"Once upon a time, he was a good father. And after she died, he was barely even a person anymore."

"I do not think he'll like this plan. Your father, I mean," she said. "I do not think he will like you being married."

Edgar shrugged. "Then it's a good thing there's nothing he can do about it," he said. "I'm a grown man and I'll do as I want."

"And if I say it's time for me to get married, then it's time for me to get married. That's a decision for me and me alone to make."

Cecilia's smile was broad and approving. "I think it's wonderful, Mr. Edgar. I think if you and this woman from the catalog will work together and find love together, then it's a good thing."

"You need love. You deserve love."

"Thank you, Cecilia."

"Si, Mr. Edgar," she said. "And I'll keep your secret."

"Thank you."

"Of course."

They heard his father bellowing about something from inside the house and Cecilia gave him a practiced smile and a sigh. She nodded, then turned and headed back to see what his father's problem was this time.

Edgar tucked into his meal, devouring the delicious bounty on his plate. He enjoyed having Cecilia around for her food as much as for her counsel.

And as Edgar ate, he thought about his plan, about the words he'd put in his ad. The more he thought about it, the more excited he became.

It was going to take a lot of work, especially since they wouldn't

know each other in the beginning. But a lot of rock-solid marriages filled with love and happiness had started that way.

He'd read a lot of stories about arranged marriages that turned into the sort of love poets and bards sang songs about. And while he didn't know if his love with a mail-order bride would turn into a love story for the ages, he thought it could be good for him.

It would fill the void of loneliness in his heart and would potentially provide him with a son who could take over the ranch when he was ready to step down. But, more than anything, it would give him the companionship he so desperately wanted.

The more he thought about it, the more Edgar looked forward to it.

Leah mopped the sweat that was pouring down her face in sheets with a rag that was already drenched. The heat inside the factory was blistering and several times, she'd feared she was going to pass out.

But that had as much to do with Leah's exhaustion as it did with the heat billowing out of the furnaces. This was her fifteenth day on the factory floor in a row—and she had worked ten hours or more each of those fifteen days.

The bell clanged, its sharp sound managing to cut through the din on the factory floor, signaling the end of shift. Leah let out a loud sigh and dropped her tools onto the table before her, then stripped off her leather apron and dropped it on top.

The morning shift all shuffled off the floor looking tired but not nearly as exhausted as she felt—most of them hadn't been picking up the extra shifts she had been.

The work was grueling and she was left at the end of each shift feeling totally spent, but she couldn't say it wasn't worth it. She'd managed to stock their cold room with enough food to last a little while.

And although she hadn't been able to pay down much of the debt, she had been able to pay a bit. Enough to get some of the creditors off her back—for a time, at least.

Leah made her way over to the wash buckets to get some of the grime off her hands and face, joined by her best friend, Marg. They washed up in silence and then walked out of the factory and into the cool air.

The sun was slipping toward the horizon and the light was fading. All Leah wanted to do was go collapse in bed and sleep for the next few weeks.

But she had responsibilities and a little sister to take care of who would be hungry by the time she got home. Sleep was still a way off yet.

"You look tired," Marg said.

Leah shrugged. "Just a long day. I'm fine."

"It's been a long fifteen days, don't you mean?"

Leah laughed softly. "I suppose so."

They walked through the streets in town, staying close to the side of the road to avoid being trampled by the wagons and buggies that were rumbling by. Leah found herself feeling envious, wishing she had a buggy to ferry her home rather than trudge all the way on foot.

It wasn't that she lived far away from the factory, but after such a long day, she wanted to exert as little effort as possible. Her legs felt like lead and her body ached in a thousand different places.

Marg handed Leah a bag that was stuffed full and heavy. She looked into the sack and saw that it was filled with food, then turned her gaze to her friend.

“What is this?” she asked.

Marg laughed softly. “It’s food. Things I thought you and Evangeline might be able to use at home.”

“That’s very sweet, Marg, and I appreciate it, but I can’t possibly —”

“You can and you will,” she cut Leah off. “Charles and I have more than enough. Those things are going to go to rot if they don’t get used.

“I’d rather see them go to you and your sister than throw them out when they do eventually spoil. And they will.”

Leah fought back the wave of emotion that threatened to overwhelm her. Marg was always doing kind, thoughtful things like that. She took care of Leah—and Evangeline.

And while it was true that they could certainly use the food, Leah hated thinking of herself as a charity case. She hated being the object of pity more than she could even express.

They walked on in silence for a little bit as Leah struggled to regain her composure. And Marg, being the good friend she was, gave her the time and space she needed.

Marg always seemed to somehow instinctively know what Leah was thinking and feeling and could always be counted on to give her whatever she needed.

“You know,” Marg finally said, “If you keep workin’ yourself to the bone like this, there will be nothin’ left of you.”

Leah shrugged. “If I don’t keep working myself to the bone, though, there will be nothing left for Evangeline and me.

“I’m afraid our parents didn’t leave us in very good shape, God rest their souls. They left us with more debt than I think I’ll ever be able to pay.”

Marg frowned. “Your father was a good man. But he wasn’t smart when it came to money, that much is true,” she said. “But Evangeline needs more than material things.

“She needs you to help her. Needs you to be there for her. She’s raisin’ herself right now, and what she needs more than anythin’ is for you to just be there. She needs your presence.”

Leah kicked at a small stone near her boot and watched as it skittered away. She knew Marg was right. About everything. She hated the idea that Evangeline was essentially raising herself.

Aside from a short time in the morning and an even shorter time in the evening when they ate—when they had food, that was—Leah was mostly absent from her life. Evangeline was responsible for coming home, doing her chores, and doing her own homework.

She was alone in the house for most of the day while Leah was at the factory working and trying to provide for her. And because of that, the only thing Leah couldn’t provide was her presence—which a girl of eight years old desperately needed.

But if Leah didn’t work as hard as she was, that girl would have literally nothing. Oh, she’d have her big sister around all the time,

but seeing those hunger pangs stretch across Evangeline's face was almost too much for Leah to bear.

Evangeline always tried to downplay her hunger or general discomfort, and it broke Leah's heart every single time. No child should have to endure the conditions they were living in.

Evangeline had offered to find work, which broke Leah's heart. She thought she could catch on as an apprentice seamstress or maybe an assistant to Mr. Wardlow, the proprietor of the mercantile.

But Leah refused to hear of it. Evangeline needed to get her education—not spend her days working.

Leah was the older sister and now that their parents were dead—gone a month now after a cholera outbreak—it was her responsibility to provide for her sister. So, she'd told Evangeline there would be plenty of time for her to work but her education was paramount.

"I can see you wastin' away, Leah, and it tears me up," Marg continued. "You've got dark circles under your eyes. You're gaunt and I can see you losin' weight every day.

"You're practically a walkin' skeleton as it is. Unless you get you some help, I fear what's goin' to become of you."

A rueful smile touched Leah's lips. "I'm afraid there is no help coming, Marg. All Evangeline and I have left in this world is each other," she said.

"And kind people like yourself, of course. I hate to be a burden on anybody—especially on a friend like you."

“You’re no burden, Leah. I just worry about you,” she said. “I know you want to give Evangeline a happy, normal life. But unless you find some help, I fear there’s not going to be a chance of that.

“I mean, look at yourself. You’re working yourself half to death and you’re still nowhere near able to give Evangeline anything resembling normal.”

Leah felt the sting of tears in her eyes knowing that every word Marg had just spoken was true. As much as she wanted to deny it and tell herself that she just needed to get a little bit ahead and that they were going to turn a corner, she couldn’t.

She was realistic enough to know that there was no getting ahead, that there was no corner to turn within a thousand miles of her. She always wanted to believe the best but deep down, in the dark recesses of her soul, Leah knew this was going to be the endless cycle of her life.

That she would never get out of that factory and she and Evangeline would be skirting the edges of destitution forever.

It was one reason she pressed her little sister so hard about getting her education. Leah wanted Evangeline to have options.

She wanted Evangeline to make more of her life than their parents had, more than Leah was going to be able to. She wanted Evangeline to live a long, happy life that left her satisfied and fulfilled.

She didn’t want her little sister to get caught up in this never-ending cycle of misery, fear, and despair.

“So, what would you suggest I do, then? It’s not like I have many

options,” Leah asked.

Marg looked at her with a mischievous twinkle in her eye that sent a shiver down Leah’s spine. She knew that look—Marg had something up her sleeve.

She suddenly realized this whole conversation had been the lead-in to whatever it was Marg was scheming. She flashed Marg a crooked grin.

“What is it you’re up to?” she asked.

Marg wore an expression of feigned shock, putting her hand over her chest to add to her look of innocence. “Me? What makes you think I’m up to something?”

“Because I know you,” Leah said.

Marg laughed softly. “All right, I may have a suggestion I want to make.”

She reached into the bag she had slung over her shoulder and brought out a magazine, which she handed to Leah with a hopeful smile on her face.

“What’s this?” Leah asked.

“Just look.”

Leah looked at the cover and then her gaze shifted to Marg. Her eyes widened and her mouth fell open as she suddenly understood what Marg had been going on about and where this conversation had all led—to the magazine in her hand.

“A catalog for mail-order brides?” Leah asked, feeling scandalized.

“It seems to be the thing people are doing these days,” Marg replied. “Especially out West, where there’s apparently a dearth of women. A beautiful girl like you could have the pick of the litter, Leah.”

She shook her head as she flipped through the pages, reading some of the advertisements from men looking for brides. Marg was right, though—it seemed most of the men looking for a wife hailed from somewhere in the West.

But aside from how mortifying it was to think that Marg believed a catalog was the only place she could find a husband, Leah had never been out of Boston before in her life.

The very idea of pulling up stakes and moving west to marry a man she didn’t know was horrifying. More than that, it was terrifying.

“I appreciate what you’re trying to do, Marg. But I don’t think this is right for me,” Leah said. “Yes, I want to marry.

“I want to have a family of my own someday, but I want to marry for love. I want to find a man who will court me proper. Not a man who placed an ad in some catalog.”

“And when are you goin’ to find the time to find you a man who’s goin’ to court you proper?” Marg fired back. “More than that, when are you goin’ to have the time to be courted proper when you’re workin’ from sunup to sundown every day?”

She opened her mouth to reply but closed it again, knowing Marg had a point. Still, that didn’t make her feel any better about the

prospect of answering an ad and marrying some man she didn't know halfway across the world. It just seemed so—wrong.

“All I'm sayin' is to think about it,” Marg said gently. “Look through the catalog. Read some of the ads and see if somebody strikes your fancy. I know I found a couple I thought would be good for you.”

Leah couldn't stop the giggle that burst from her throat as she thought about Marg flipping through the pages, looking for a husband for Leah. It was such an absurd thought that she couldn't help herself.

They stopped at the junction in the road where they parted ways. Marg looked her in the eye, her expression sober.

“I really believe that if you want to give Evangeline a good, normal life, this is the way to do it,” she said. “You'd be givin' her a home and some stability—things neither of you've had lately.

“And you never know. You might find a good man in those pages. All I'm sayin' is don't close your mind to it. Think it over and take a look, hon.”

Leah listened to Marg's words and nodded. There was wisdom in what her friend was counseling. But there was even more uncertainty.

Even if she did find somebody who sounded good in an ad, that didn't mean he would be a good man. He could turn out to be a drinker who had no compunction about laying hands on a woman.

And while Leah was strong and had learned to be tough, believing she could take care of herself, what would happen if he turned his

attention to Evangeline?

“This could be your way out, Leah. Evangeline’s way out,” Marg urged. “And it could be your path to that normal, happy life you want to give her.”

“Thank you, Marg. You’re a true friend,” she said. “And I promise I’ll give it some thought.”

“Good girl.”

They said their goodbyes and parted ways, then Leah turned and continued on. When she got home, she put everything Marg had given her—which turned out to be a lot more than she’d first thought and included some fresh meat—into the cold room.

With a sudden bounty of food at her disposal, she made Evangeline a nicer-than-normal dinner and they chatted about their days.

Her little sister was her usual bright and bubbly self, doing everything she could to make Leah laugh and take her mind off her troubles. Leah had always appreciated that about her sister.

After Evangeline had gone to bed, Leah sat in the rocker and stared into the flames, thinking about everything Marg had said. She thought about the life she wanted to give Evangeline versus what she could expect if she continued on in this same rut she was in.

It was an endless cycle of money going out faster than she could make it and the pair of them bordering on starvation most of the time. That was no life for a child. And that was no life for her, either.

She did want more. She wanted a shot at a good life, and Leah

knew that was never going to happen in Boston. Not if she lived to be a thousand years old.

With a sigh, she opened the catalog in her lap and started to read through the ads placed by men looking for a bride. She dismissed the first three pages of the catalog instantly.

None of the men sounded like somebody she would be interested in. Not only were they twice her age, there was a tone in the ads that made her think they were more looking for a maid than a wife.

It wasn't until she got to page six that she ran across an ad that resonated with her. She read it several times over and could sense an uncertainty in his words.

The tone was kind. Sweet, even. He was about her age and spoke of looking for a woman he could build a life with. He wrote of partnership and even of trying to find love.

If words could be believed, he didn't not seem to Leah like a man looking for a woman who would share his bed and spend her days cleaning up after him. He seemed like a man looking for a woman to be his bride in every true sense of the word.

She read his words once more and felt something right about them. Something inside of her shifted and though she was still very hesitant, Leah found herself more intrigued than anything.

She decided it couldn't hurt to write to him without expectation of anything. If he was truly as good as he sounded, she was sure he would have many women writing to him.

The chances of him even noticing her letter would be very small.

But she looked toward the hallway and thought about Evangeline curled up underneath the heavy blanket. She didn't go to bed hungry tonight, and maybe not for the next few nights thanks to Marg's generosity.

Eventually, though, they would be literally scraping the bottom of the barrel again and going to bed with their stomachs growling. It was inevitable in this wicked cycle they were trapped in.

She might be able to change their stars, if Leah were only willing to take a chance on somebody who sounded wonderful—on paper, anyway.

And although her pride screamed at her to stop, Leah tried to quiet that voice. If there was a chance she could give Evangeline a good and normal life, her pride could be damned.

It was a chance she knew she was going to have to take.

“S
low down, Leah,” Marg said with a laugh. “I’m not as fast as you.”

“Sorry,” Leah replied.

“What’s got you so fired up these last few weeks, anyway? It seems like the second the bell goes off, you’re out the door and sprinting home.”

Leah laughed at that. “I am not sprinting.”

“May as well be, with how quickly you’re walking,” she said. “What’s put such a bee in your bonnet?”

Leah smiled and looked away, feeling the familiar warmth rising in her cheeks. She hadn’t told Marg that she had answered an ad in the catalog she’d given to Leah all those weeks ago now.

She had written it without anticipating that she would actually receive a reply. She didn’t want to get her hopes up. And she really didn’t want to get Evangeline’s hopes—or fears—up, either.

Nor did she want to say anything to Marg until she knew how this

was going to go, one way or the other.

But when she got home one day a couple of weeks after penning that first letter, Leah's heart had nearly stopped dead in her chest. She'd tucked it away in one of her books and hadn't opened it for almost two days.

She had eventually opened it, though, and blushed as she recalled how her hands had trembled as she held the page. Edgar's words in that first letter had filled her with a sense of wonder and awe.

But even beyond that, they'd filled her with a sense of hope that there was a good man out there who could help give her and Evangeline the stability they lacked. Who could give them a normal, happy life.

"Nothing. There's no bee in my bonnet," Leah said. "I'm not even wearing a bonnet."

Marg stopped her in her tracks and looked at her closely, pursing her lips as she tried to see into Leah's mind. Leah giggled and looked away, not wanting to let Marg in.

But Marg knew her well—too well sometimes, Leah thought. Marg always knew when she was hiding something.

And although she'd been able to keep this secret for a little while, Leah knew it was only a matter of time before Marg caught wind of it.

"You've got a secret," she said, a smile curling the corners of her mouth upward. "What are you not tellin' me?"

"What? I always tell you everything."

“Apparently not everything,” she said with a laugh. “I can smell it on you. So come on, out with it now.”

Leah wanted to keep it secret mostly because she didn’t want to jinx it. She feared if she talked about it, it would all come crashing down around her.

She had become more superstitious about things since her parents died, it seemed. But she was also dying to talk about it. She wanted to tell Marg, her best friend, everything.

She’d been wanting to talk to Marg about it so badly, she thought she might burst. She’d just been afraid to say anything.

“So, do you remember that catalog you gave me a little while back?”

Marg raised an eyebrow. “I do.”

“Well, I wrote to a man named Edgar and...” Leah’s voice trailed off and she didn’t know what to say. How could she describe him?

Marg leaned forward, as if sitting on the edge of a seat, her eyes boring into Leah’s, her expression expectant. “And? And what?”

“And... I don’t know,” Leah said with a giggle. “He’s just kind. Compassionate. Caring. He seems like a good man with a good heart. I mean, as much as you can tell about a person through a letter, anyway.”

“I think you can tell a lot,” Marg said. “So, tell me more about Edgar. I’m dying of curiosity now!”

“Well, he owns a ranch in Colorado. He really wants a family of his

own and says because he's always so busy working his ranch, he doesn't have the time to go meet somebody in town," Leah says.

"He said he prefers to do it this way, anyway. He says he can always express his thoughts and feelings better in a letter than talkin' face to face."

"Colorado. That's so far," Marg said.

"I know," she replied, her tone tinged with sadness.

It had struck her already. If things kept going the way they were with Edgar, and he eventually proposed to her, it would mean uprooting her life and moving halfway across the country.

It would mean taking Evangeline from the only place she's ever known. Away from her friends.

The mere idea of it scared Leah to death.

"But with the way the rail lines are going in everywhere, it's only going to be a day or two to get from Boston to Colorado," Marg said brightly.

"We'll still be able to see each other. It's not like you're moving to China or something."

Leah offered her a weak smile. At best, she knew they would see each other maybe once a year. Maybe less.

Even with the addition of so many rail lines and with how fast the trains were becoming, it was still a massive time commitment to go halfway across the country. Not to mention how costly it was.

But she appreciated that Marg was trying to put her best face on it.

“Have you told him about Evangeline?” Marg asked.

“Of course. I wrote of her in my initial letter to him.”

“And what does he say?”

“He said that he grew up an only child and had always wanted siblings,” Leah said. “He told me he would never want to separate me and Evangeline and would never come between us. He seems to be a very family-oriented man.”

Marg clasped her hands to her heart. “That is wonderful, Leah. He sounds like a good man,” she said. “Maybe even the kind of man who would make a good husband.”

Marg looked at her with a sparkle in her eye and a sly grin on her face that made Leah blush and look away for a moment.

“Has he mentioned anything about it yet? About getting married?” Marg pressed. “I mean, he did take out an ad for a bride, after all.”

“No, he hasn’t mentioned anything about marriage in his letters yet. But we’ve only exchanged a few,” she replied. “I’m actually kind of glad he hasn’t said anything about it yet.”

“I like that he’s taking his time and isn’t rushing into anything. I like that he’s trying to get to know me first. I think that says a lot about him.”

“I’m so happy for you, Leah.”

“Nothing’s certain just yet.”

Marg pulled a face at her. "A man doesn't take an ad out in a catalog like that if he doesn't intend to marry. And the fact that you two have been corresponding for this long tells me it's only a matter of time before he asks."

"I don't take anything for granted," Leah replied. "I mean, I am certain there are a great many other women he corresponds with. How could there not be for a man who seems to be as good as Edgar does?"

"He may be quite the catch, but he'd be lucky to have you, I can tell you that," Marg said. "Very lucky."

Marg's smile was so wide, Leah was half-afraid her friend's head was going to split open. She looked so genuinely happy for Leah that it made her own heart swell with joy.

It was true that they hadn't broached the subject of marriage yet, but Leah was sure things were headed that way, and knowing she had Marg's approval meant the world to her.

"Well, like I said, nothing is certain. Right now, we're just exchanging letters and getting to know each other," Leah said.

"Does Evangeline know anything?"

Leah shook her head. "No, there's no reason to get her anxious or upset until we know if there is anything to all of this."

Marg nodded. "That's probably wise."

"But, to use your words, that's why there has been a bee in my bonnet lately. I like to get home to see if there are any new letters from him," Leah admitted, her cheeks burning with embarrassment

over how giddy and silly she sounded.

“Well, that’s understandable,” Marg replied. “It also explains why you’ve had a smile on your face for weeks now.”

“I can’t help it. It’s just, his words are—they’re amazing. He makes me smile. Even through a letter he can make me smile.”

“That’s a good thing, Leah. A very good thing,” she said. “Men who care enough to make you smile seem rare. You need to keep hold of that one.”

“I still think it’s too early to be thinking like that, but I appreciate it,” Leah said. “We’ll see how it goes from here.”

“Oh, I already know where it’s going to go,” Marg says. “And I’m pretty sure I’ll be calling you Mrs. Edgar sooner, rather than later. I’ll see you in the morning, hon.”

They shared a laugh then Leah watched as Marg turned and headed for the small house she shared with her husband. Leah’s heart was filled with a lightness she hadn’t felt since before her parents died and she practically skipped home.

After supper, Evangeline went to her room to read. Since it wasn’t a school night, Leah let her stay up later than usual to read and whatnot. Leah had been taking the nights to herself.

Some nights, she went straight to bed, but others she enjoyed sitting in front of the hearth, a roaring fire crackling and popping inside as she read Edgar’s letter over and over again.

She glanced down the hallway and saw that Evangeline’s door was closed. With a sly smile on her face, Leah pulled the letter from

Edgar out of the pocket of her apron and turned it over in her hand.

She traced the letters with the tips of her fingers, then carefully opened the envelope. She slid the letter out and unfolded it.

Just seeing his writing on the page made her feel warm inside. But when she read his words, it was like a hug. She always felt comforted. She felt cared for and protected.

He had never made mention of marriage, but in a handful of letters, he had made her feel like he would take care of her. That he would keep her safe. And more importantly, keep Evangeline safe, as well.

That was the most important quality about him and really showed Leah what was truly down deep in his heart.

She read the words on the page over, letting herself be swept away on a current of emotion. But then she read the closing and felt her heart lurch. Her mouth grew dry, and the page trembled in her hand.

She read the words again, disbelief washing through her as she did. And when she read them again, the smile on her lips threatened to crack her entire face in two.

Now that we've gotten to know each other over these last few months, I've become comfortable with you, as I hope you have with me. I think we are right for each other, and I think it's time.

I can give you and Evangeline a good life out here. I can give you some of the stability you're seeking. I know this isn't the most formal or proper way to do it but, Leah, I'd like to ask you to marry me...

Her vision shimmered as tears welled in her eyes as she read the words again.

“Leah, are you all right?”

Leah snapped her head around to see Evangeline standing in the doorway. She’d been so caught up in her happiness about Edgar’s proposal that she hadn’t heard her little sister creeping down the hallway.

And now, as Evangeline stared at her with wide, worried eyes, Leah felt her breath catch in her throat and her heart stuttered.

She had vowed to herself that she would never lie to Evangeline and so far, she hadn’t had a reason to. But in that moment, she gave thought to it—she didn’t know if Evangeline was ready for what she had to say.

But Leah had already decided that if Edgar proposed, she was going to accept. She had come to care for Edgar and thought they were a good match.

And that meant they were going to be leaving Boston for good and starting over in Colorado. They were going to have a new life. A better life.

Evangeline might not see it that way, however. It was why Leah had intended to break the news to her slowly and ease her little sister into it.

She thought she’d have more time to work Evangeline into the idea. But time had apparently run out.

“There’s nothing I’m wrong,” Leah said. “I’m fine. Better than fine,

actually.”

Evangeline cocked her head. “Then why are you crying?”

“They’re tears of happiness. I’m crying because I’m happy. Excited.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Come sit down, Evangeline.”

Evangeline came over and sat in the rocker that once belonged to their mother. She was a slight girl and she looked tiny in the rocker. She looked at Leah with wide eyes.

Leah’s sister was wise beyond her years and undoubtedly knew something big was going on. And given that their experience with big news tended to be the sort that turned their lives upside down in a not-so-positive way, it was no wonder Evangeline looked so scared.

“You know I want you to be happy, right? More than anything, I want you to be happy and have a normal life where you don’t have to go to bed hungry or want for much,” Leah started. “I mean, you know that, right?”

Evangeline nodded. “Yes. I know that.”

“Well, there’s a man who wants us to move to Colorado and start a new life out there,” Leah said. “A good life, Evangeline. One where we aren’t just getting by—”

“Colorado? But that means we’ll have to leave Boston.”

Leah nodded. "It does. And trust me, I know how scary that is. It scares me, too. A lot," she said. "But we have a chance to have the sort of life we're never going to have here."

"A life where I won't be working twelve hours a day, seven days a week, and we won't have to worry about starving. I'll be able to spend time with you, Evangeline."

Evangeline's big green eyes watered, and she looked caught somewhere between terrified and mournful. Leah understood, for they were feelings she struggled with herself.

But she had come around to thinking that moving to Colorado and marrying Edgar would be a life-changing opportunity for both her and Evangeline.

"Ma and Pa are still here, though. If we go, we'll forget about them ____"

Leah shook her head. "No, honey. We won't. We'll never forget about them."

"But if we're not here in Boston, we will."

"I promise you that we won't. Do you know why?"

Evangeline shook her head. "Why?"

"Because Ma and Pa are here," Leah said, tapping her chest where her heart lay. "They're in our hearts and no matter where we're living, they're always going to be with us. Always."

"But all my friends are here."

“And you’ll make new friends in Colorado.”

Tears rolled down Evangeline’s smooth, white cheeks. Leah could see how much her little sister was struggling with the idea of moving from Boston to Colorado and it broke her heart.

She never wanted Evangeline to be sad or scared. But more than that, she never wanted her to be hungry or ever feel the sting of want, where she never knew what it was to be happy and to be content.

It wasn’t going to be easy. Boston was all they both knew. It was where their lives and everything they had ever known were. But not all changes were bad.

Some changes altered the course of your life for the better. And Leah thought this was one of those situations. It would just take courage for them to take that chance.

“I think this could be good for us, Evangeline. This could really change our lives forever. We can finally have all those things we could never have if we stayed here,” Leah said.

Her little sister looked even smaller in that moment. Her green eyes were wide and glistening and Leah could practically smell the fear and uncertainty wafting from her.

“May I go now?” Evangeline asked. “I’d like to go back to my bedroom.”

Leah looked at her for a moment and let out a breath. She nodded. “Of course.”

Evangeline slipped off the chair and practically sprinted back to

her room. Leah flinched when the door slammed shut with a sound like the blast from a shotgun.

Leah hated the idea of tearing her little sister away from her life and everything she'd ever known. But if she didn't, Leah would never be able to keep her promise to give her sister a better life.

Edgar held the railing up and slid it into the notch, then moved to the other side and did the same. After that, he used strips of leather to tie the railing into place.

He grunted as he tied them tight. Sweat rolled down his back, making his shirt stick to his skin uncomfortably.

When he got the railing secured and tied, Edgar stood up and stretched, then pulled the kerchief out of his back pocket, took off his hat, and swabbed the sweat from his brow.

It was a sunny day, and the heat was brutal. He grabbed his waterskin and took a long swallow of water that had grown warm in the heat of the day. But he was thirsty, so he drank it down anyway.

Edgar leaned against the fence he'd just repaired and put his boot up on the bottom railing, noticing a bit of a bow in it. The wood was starting to splinter and crack.

He was going to have to replace that railing soon, too, more than likely.

He stared out into the field, watching Alberto in the distance herding the cattle from one field to the next, trying to get them through the fence. Alberto was good. Smooth.

He got the herd moving quickly and efficiently. A wry grin curled Edgar's lips as he watched the man. He could never get a herd of cattle moving like Alberto did.

He always ended up chasing his cows all over the field, trying to funnel them through the gate and into the adjacent field. But not Alberto. The cows moved for him like he could actually speak with them.

Edgar sighed. His thoughts turned to Leah and to the letter he'd sent to her. More specifically, the fact that he'd asked her to marry him.

He hadn't intended to be so bold but when he started writing, it just flowed out of him. He couldn't say he regretted it. It felt right.

The timing of it felt right. He and Leah had exchanged a number of letters over the past few months, and he felt that he'd gotten to know her well.

Of the women who'd contacted him about his ad in the catalog, Edgar had felt the most connected to Leah. They had some things in common and she seemed grounded.

He liked that she was a family-first kind of woman and one who wanted children of her own one day. Edgar wanted the same—a son who could carry on the ranch and his name after he was gone.

And he greatly admired what she was doing for her sister. There were a lot of people out there who would have dropped their

young sibling off at a home for children or a church.

He'd even heard of some less scrupulous people selling their younger siblings to the highest bidder just to be rid of the responsibility of caring for them.

But Leah was dedicated to her younger sister. Devoted to her. And Edgar liked that about her. He respected her for that.

Edgar thought he and Leah made for a good match. They had similar values and beliefs. Their conversations—at least through letters—were good.

And he had to believe that would translate over to great conversations in person. He liked that Leah could stimulate his mind in addition to putting a flutter into his heart.

She was unique. He'd never met somebody like her before and he thought they could potentially be happy together. At least, they could be if she was the same in person as she was in her letters.

But even believing they could be a good match, he'd been on pins and needles ever since he sent the letter out. He wanted to think that they were on the same page and that she wanted to marry him.

Until he got a letter back saying as much, however, the uncertainty was wearing on him. He was nervous and couldn't keep himself from imagining the worst. Imagining that she was going to say no.

He didn't want to believe that.

He didn't want to admit that even through their letters, he had let himself become a bit more attached to her than he should have

and that her saying no would be a bit of a crushing blow.

Edgar was inexperienced in matters of the heart. He had sequestered himself away for so much of his life that he'd never had a girlfriend. Had never laid with a woman before. He'd never even kissed a woman.

And so, what he was feeling for Leah was all new to him—new and terrifying. But at the same time, it was exhilarating.

The idea that a good woman like Leah seemed to be as attached to him as he was to her, and that she would want to marry him, made his heart race and his palms sweat. It was as exciting as it was intimidating.

Inexperienced as he was, he didn't know what sort of husband he would make. A part of him feared he would be more like his father. That he would be cold and distant. That he would be aloof and unfeeling.

His father had doted on his mother, yes. But even she sometimes had had trouble with the fact that he kept everybody at an arm's distance.

Edgar had long ago vowed that he would never be anything like his father. But now, faced with the prospect of actually getting married, he worried that he would not be able to prevent himself from slipping into those patterns of behavior.

Picking up his box of tools, Edgar headed back toward the barn. The horses all snorted and stamped at the ground as he walked down the aisle to the bench at the back.

He set his box down then grabbed some sugar cubes from the box,

then walked down the aisle and greeted all his horses, speaking gently to them and stroking their muzzles as he fed them all a bit of sugar.

He loved the horses—he loved all animals, really. But his family’s horses always held a special place in his heart.

“Mr. Edgar, Mr. Edgar,” Cecilia said breathlessly as she hurried into the barn. “A letter arrived for you.”

She pulled the letter out of her apron and held it up to him. Cecilia handed the envelope to Edgar and he took it with a smile—a smile that grew wider when he saw the familiar writing and postmark.

“Is from her? From Miss Leah, isn’t it?” Cecilia asked.

Edgar nodded. “It is.”

He opened the letter and started to read it as Cecilia stood there anxiously waiting to hear what she had written. Edgar had been talking to Cecilia about Leah ever since he received his first letter from her.

She was insightful and never failed to have some pearl of wisdom about women or relationships in general. Cecilia was married for twenty-five years before her husband passed away.

She came to work for him about a year after that, and though Edgar could sometimes see that the grief still sometimes plagued her, Cecilia was usually upbeat and positive.

She chose to focus on the good memories and the love she’d shared with her husband, Efrain, rather than the sorrow she felt without him. It took strength to do what she was doing, and Edgar

respected her for it.

He'd told her that once and she'd said it wasn't strength, but her love for Efrain that only allowed for the good memories to fill her heart.

She knew Edgar had asked for Leah's hand in his last letter to her. She had, in fact, encouraged him to take that leap.

She'd said that Leah sounded like a good woman who would be a good wife to him and that if he didn't ask her soon, she might move on without him.

She'd said it was possible Leah was corresponding with other men from the catalog and if she felt like he was not serious about marriage, she would find a man who was.

Cecilia believed that a woman who answered an ad in a catalog from a man looking for a wife was serious about it and would not wait around forever.

That had spurred Edgar into action, and he had sent a letter off that day with an offer of marriage. And as he read the words she had written in return, Edgar felt a rush of emotion unlike anything he'd ever felt before.

It was such a sense of elation that it stole the breath from his lungs and made him smile wider than he thought possible. Edgar read her words several times, absorbing them, committing them to memory, his heart swelling more with each reading.

He looked up at Cecilia feeling lightheaded and wrapped in a sense of wonder. "She said yes," he said, his voice colored with disbelief. "Cecilia, she said yes!"

The older woman's eyes shimmered with tears and she clasped her hands together over her heart. She smiled at him fondly, like he was a favored son.

"Mr. Edgar, I'm so happy for you," she said, beaming. "You deserve a good woman in your life. You deserve to be happy."

"I just hope I'll be a good husband to her, Cecilia," he said. "I mean, I don't know anythin' about bein' a husband."

Her smile stretched from ear to ear. "Neither did my Efrain. But he was the best husband anyone could ever hope to have," she said.

"It's not about what you know about being a husband, Mr. Edgar. It's what you learn about your wife—and what she learns about you. It's about how you grow together."

A gentle smile touched his lips. What she said made some sense, at least, in an abstract way.

But he thought that perhaps once Leah was there with him, it would become more practical for him. That he would know what she was talking about and that it would all make sense in a more tangible way.

"I hope you're right, Cecilia. I mean, I know I don't know this woman—not truly—but I feel like I know her heart already," he said. "I feel like I know that she's a good woman and I really want to make her happy."

"I want to treat her well and make her feel safe—and her little sister, too. I want them to feel welcome and glad they moved from Boston."

“You are a good man, Mr. Edgar. I know you will make a good husband,” she said. “I know you will make Miss Leah feel welcome. That you’ll make her happy.”

“I hope so, Cecilia.”

Edgar read Leah’s words again and felt that sense of excitement washing over him again. But when he looked up, he saw a pensive expression on Cecilia’s face.

“What is it?” he asked.

“You need to tell your father,” she said. “He needs to know.”

Edgar sighed. “I know, I know,” he said. “I just—I know I have to, but I already know he’s not going to like it and I don’t feel like fighting.”

“Probably not,” she agreed. “But he still needs to know.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“I will make a special dinner tonight. You two can eat, have a little wine, and you can tell him then,” she said. “Nobody can be mad over a good meal.”

Edgar laughed. “You’ve known my father for how long?”

She gave Edgar a sly, knowing smile. It was true, though. Edgar couldn’t count the number of nice meals his father had ruined by just being himself.

But Cecilia was right. This was technically still his house, and Amon deserved to know that Edgar would be moving Leah and

Evangeline into it.

Cecilia gave him a smile. "I go and start dinner," she said. "I'm happy for you, Edgar. Nobody I know deserves happiness and love more than you."

"Thank you, Cecilia. For everything."

"Of course, Mr. Edgar."

His father had been unusually outgoing over dinner, laughing and joking with Edgar the way he had when Edgar was nothing but a child. Edgar had relished every second of it; he knew it wouldn't last.

That was just the way of things. He had his good days and his bad days—though, anymore, it seemed he had more bad days than good.

But Edgar remembered a time when his father had been the center of his universe. Though he'd kept himself apart from the people in town, he had been a good father.

He had certainly been more present in Edgar's life before his mother died. He had been funny and clever and never failed to get Edgar laughing. But times had changed, and life could do terrible things to people.

"This is delicious, Cecilia," his father said. "Thank you."

"Of course, Mr. Amon."

Cecilia cleared the table as Edgar poured his father another glass of wine. Edgar was nervous and his stomach was clenched in knots.

He'd been trying to find the right time to tell Amon his news all night, but it had never seemed appropriate. Now that dinner was over and the table was clear, he was all out of excuses and all out of time.

He sat across the table from his father and the air between them crackled with anticipation. Edgar took a drink of his wine to work up a little moisture in his mouth.

He felt ridiculous. He was a grown man. He shouldn't be this nervous about telling his father he was going to get married. It should be happy news.

But then, Edgar recalled his father's words on the day of his mother's funeral and knew Amon was going to see this as anything but.

"Are you all right, son?"

Edgar looked up, his father's voice pulling him out of his head and back to the present. He frowned slightly and nodded. "I'm fine. Yes."

His father cocked his head. "You look like you have something on your mind."

"I—I suppose I do."

"Well? What is it?"

Edgar drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly, trying to settle

his nerves. There was no way around this. He had to push straight through the fear that gripped him and deal with the consequences as it all played out.

“I’m getting married, Pa.”

His father paused with his wine glass halfway to his mouth, his eyes burning into Edgar’s, his disapproval more than clear. Edgar suddenly felt like a child in trouble all over again.

Finally, Amon raised the glass to his lips and drained the last of his wine. He set the glass down harder than necessary and Edgar instinctively flinched.

“Why would you want to do that?” Amon asked.

“Because I want to find love, Pa. I want to start a family,” he said. “I’m twenty-six years old. It’s about time I do that.”

His father shook his head. “You’re makin’ a mistake, boy.”

Edgar looked down into his wine glass, trying to control the twin threads of anger and hurt that were coursing through him. “I’d hoped you’d be happy for me, Pa.”

“Why would I be happy about this? Because you have this misguided notion that your life ain’t complete without love or somethin’?”

“Pa, not all of us want to live in misery,” Edgar snapped. “Some of us want to be happy. Some of us want to be in love and have a family.”

His father scoffed. “You’re naïve. Got too much of your mother in

you, boy.”

“You loved Ma; I know you did.”

“And look what it got me. Nothin’ but a lifetime of pain,” he growled. “You want me to be happy for you? Ain’t gonna happen. I think this is the stupidest thing you could ever do to yourself.”

“Taking a chance on love and happiness is the stupidest thing I could do?”

“That’s what I said, ain’t it?”

Edgar shook his head, his jaw tightening and his heart racing. The pain of his father’s rejection was sharp, and he found that he couldn’t speak for a moment.

“You do this and you’re gonna be sorry you did, Edgar. Mark my words—you’ll be sorry and heartbroken. It’s all you can expect out of love.”

His father’s voice was bitter and angry, and Amon shot to his feet so quickly, he knocked his chair over behind him. He flashed Edgar a dark look and stormed out of the house, slamming the door behind him, causing Edgar to flinch.

Gritting his teeth, Edgar tried to tamp down the anger that burned within him.

He heard the voice of his mother, heard her words about love echoing through his mind. He was choosing to take a chance on love—as his mother would have done. He was rejecting his father’s misery.

He refused to live in a pit of despair. He was not going to live the life his father had chosen after his mother died.

He did not want to be alone, and he did not want to turn his back on the idea of finding love. Of starting a family. He did not want to become his father.

His father's words had hurt him, had cut him to the quick. But he wasn't going to let it deter him. Edgar was choosing hope.

Amon stormed out of the house, leaving Edgar staring after him in anger and shock. He loved his boy, but Edgar just didn't know what he was doing. Didn't know what he was getting himself into.

He stomped across the yard and leaned against the fence, staring off into the darkness of the pastures beyond. Amon lit up a cigarillo and took a deep draw, watching the plume of smoke drift up to the heavens as he exhaled.

The sky overhead was velvety black and there were thousands of brilliant, shimmering points of light. Maybe millions. They gleamed like chips of diamond, cold but beautiful.

Amon had always enjoyed staring at the nighttime sky. It had always made him feel humble, like a small speck of dust in a universe that was too large to even comprehend.

Staring into the vastness of the nighttime sky kept things in perspective for Amon when life seemed like it was getting too big for him to handle and he felt a little overwhelmed.

Amon put his foot up on the lower fence rail and took a drag on his

cigarillo, contemplating the darkness of the sky above. He was trying to calm himself down.

After getting into it with Edgar, he felt his heart racing and an angry tremble running through his body. His jaw was clenched so tight it ached and he felt a hard throbbing forming deep in his head.

It had been a while since he'd been that upset, and he tried to avoid it—Doc Whitten had told him how bad it was for his health—but his son always knew how to rile him up somethin' fierce.

He walked over to the large willow tree that sat on the edge of the pond, a tree he and Geraldine had planted shortly after they'd moved there and had started to build their ranch.

It felt like a hundred years ago. Another lifetime, perhaps. But this big ol' willow always brought Amon a sense of peace. Comfort, even.

It reminded him of his lost love, and when he was near it, he could almost feel her spirit there beneath the wide, drooping boughs.

Amon exhaled a thick plume of smoke as he ran his fingers across the trunk of the tree. He looked at the large heart he'd carved into the bark so long ago.

He traced the tip of his finger over Geraldine's initials and a brief smile flickered across his lips as his mind and heart were flooded with memories of her. Amon closed his eyes and he could see her face, see the way her eyes crinkled at the corners when she laughed.

His ears rang with the sound of that laughter. He could hear her

voice and smell her perfume—lilacs. It was her favorite scent.

All the pleasant memories quickly faded, though, as the image of what she looked like in her final days surfaced in his mind. Frail. Emaciated. Almost skeletal. She'd been too weak to do anything but lie in bed.

In those final weeks, his Geraldine had barely spoken, and she'd never laughed. But Amon had sat with her for hours on end, simply holding her hand, feeling his heart break a little more with each passing day.

By the end of things, he'd been praying for God to take her. Amon couldn't bear to watch her wither and decay before his very eyes.

When Geraldine finally passed, it broke something inside of him. Amon remembered staring into her wide, unseeing eyes. He'd like to say when she went, it was peaceful.

But he knew all too well the pain that had ravaged her body in those final weeks. Geraldine was stoic and always tried to hide it, but he knew. He could see it.

And her strength, her stoicism in the face of such unrelenting agony had torn his heart to pieces.

The people in town still didn't look at Amon when he saw them. Memories in Coyote Hollow were long, and they remembered him most for the fact that he hadn't attended Geraldine's funeral.

She was loved so well in town that his not attending her services was seen as an unforgivable slight by the locals. But that was fine with him. Amon didn't care one way or the other.

He'd said his goodbyes to his wife before they had put her in the ground. He'd made his peace—such as he'd been able to—with his angel being gone.

All that was left when they'd buried her was a husk, a shell of the woman she used to be. The disease that had ravaged her had left his wife hollowed out and empty. That wasn't his wife. It was an empty vessel.

Amon knew that his Geraldine had already ascended and was with the angels above. And he'd made his peace with that, so to his mind, there was no need to go watch them bury a body that wasn't his wife.

But the people in Coyote Hollow didn't forget. Nor would they forgive him for not observing their traditions.

The pain he felt when Geraldine took her last breath—pain he'd felt every single day since then—wasn't something he'd wish on anybody. Least of all his own son.

That was how love always ended—with somebody left behind, their heart shattered into more pieces than there were stars in the nighttime sky.

And that person who was left behind invariably spent the balance of their days running around, trying to pick up those pieces only to find them slipping through their fingers like grains of sand.

Amon loved his son and wanted to spare him from that sort of heartache and misery. He'd tried to tell him more times than he could count that love and marriage never failed to end badly and that he should avoid them.

He'd encouraged Edgar to put his focus on other endeavors, pour his passion into his work, and never expose his heart the way Amon had. He tried to be an example to his son of the perils of love.

And yet, despite all of that, despite his repeated warnings, Edgar was bound and determined to get himself married, anyway. He'd been so dumbfounded when Edgar dropped the news on him that at first, Amon didn't know what to say.

A thousand emotions had swirled through him in an instant before he'd finally settled on anger. It was the only way he was going to get his point across with his son, it seemed, since his life experience hadn't made a dent in Edgar's desire to marry.

"Foolish boy," Amon muttered to himself.

He looked once again at the heart he'd carved into the tree and ran his fingers over the letters permanently emblazoned on the trunk. She had been the light of his life and the pain Amon felt for Geraldine's loss was every bit as powerful today as it had been the day she'd passed.

All he wanted was to shield Edgar from ever knowing that sort of agony. To make him see there was nothing but pain at the end of the road he was traveling.

But as he listened to the breeze sighing through the branches of the willow tree, he could almost hear Geraldine's voice telling him that Edgar was a grown man now, a man who needed to make his own decisions about his life.

He could hear his beloved telling him the best thing he could do was encourage Edgar to follow his heart, but to be there for him if

and when he fell. To always be there for him.

Geraldine had had a good heart and a soft touch. Especially when it came to Edgar. But this was a road Amon wouldn't be able to travel with him on.

If Edgar was bound and determined to get married and open himself up to the misery Amon lived with every day, there was nothing he could do. He would have to travel that road and feel that sharp sting of pain when it all inevitably came crashing down around him.

Amon had tried to warn him, tried to steer him onto a different path. But Edgar was a grown man. He was responsible for his own decisions—and their consequences.

"I tried, Geraldine," Amon whispered. "I tried to protect him."

Amon turned and walked back toward the house, intending to enter through the rear and slip into his bedroom to avoid having to see his son. He just didn't think he would be up for a conversation tonight.

And as he walked, a cool breeze stirred around him, carrying with it the scent of lilacs.

“S_{top},” Evangeline complained. “If you keep brushing my hair, it’s all going to fall out.”

Leah laughed softly. “I’m not sure that’s how it works.”

She put the brush back into her bag anyway and pulled out a green silk ribbon that had been a gift to Evangeline from their mother. She helped her little sister pull her hair back and use the ribbon to tie it.

Once they were done, Evangeline looked at her with a smile. “You’re nervous,” she noted.

“And why would you say that?”

“Because you always fidget when you’re nervous,” she replied with a giggle. “You’ve been fussin’ with my hair for hours now.”

Leah arched an eyebrow at her. “It’s hardly been hours. I’ve only been brushing your hair for maybe ten minutes.”

“Well, it felt like hours.”

Laughing softly, Leah settled back in her seat. When they'd awoken that morning, knowing that they'd be reaching their destination today, Leah and her sister had put on their best dresses and since then, she'd been fussing with her own clothes, as well as Evangeline's.

It was important to her that they make a good first impression on Edgar. After all, she was to be his wife and Leah wanted him to think her well put together. Perhaps even pretty.

As the train rumbled down the tracks, she glanced over at her little sister and saw the dark expression etched into her features. She knew Evangeline was not happy about moving west.

If she'd had it her way, they'd be living in the same house in Boston until the end of their days. And Leah felt terrible for taking her little sister away from her friends and everything she knew.

She hated that she had to uproot Evangeline that way. For a girl her age, Leah knew it was upsetting.

But she was determined to provide Evangeline with a good life, one that wasn't filled with deprivation and want.

And the only way she was going to give that life to her little sister was by pulling up stakes and moving west to marry a man who could provide the sort of stability they needed and had lacked for so long.

Leah knew Evangeline wasn't happy, but she hoped once they arrived and saw all the new and different things they had never seen or experienced in Boston that Evangeline would begin to warm up to the idea.

That was her most fervent hope. But Leah had to admit, if only to herself, that she was worried, as well.

Having spent every moment of her life in Boston, she had no idea what to expect in the west. More than that, she had no idea what to expect from Edgar.

The truth was, all she knew of him was what he'd written in his letters. And though she had felt a spark and a true connection in his words, they were just words.

She knew well that flowery words could often hide the monster that lurked behind the pen. Not that she thought Edgar was a monster or genuinely feared that he would mistreat her, but there was always that ever-present sliver of doubt in the back of her mind.

She simply didn't know him and how he truly was in real life as opposed to words on a page.

Leah had a good feeling about him, wanted to believe he was the man he'd portrayed himself to be in his letters. But until she was face to face with him, there was just no way of knowing for sure.

"You look scared."

Leah looked at her sister and smiled. "I'm not scared, silly. I'm just anxious to get off this train, that's all."

Evangeline arched an eyebrow at her. "No, I've seen you scared before and you always have that little crease between your eyebrows," she said. "You're definitely scared."

Leah laughed softly. "You are far too observant for my own good,"

she said. "You're supposed to be eight. Not eighteen."

"I am eight."

"Well, most eight-year-olds aren't nearly as observant as you are," Leah said. "You're like a grown up stuffed inside a little kid's body."

Evangeline laughed and shook her head. "I'm eight. You know I'm eight."

"Do I, though?"

Evangeline giggled and slapped Leah playfully on the shoulder. It was the most childlike thing Leah had seen her sister do since before their parents died.

It wasn't much, but Leah was choosing to see it as a good sign.

"What is the town called again?" Evangeline asked.

"Coyote Hollow."

She wrinkled her nose. "That's a funny name."

Leah smiled. "I suppose it is."

"Are there animals on his ranch?"

"I know he said he has horses and cows."

"Cows are smelly."

"Yes, they are," Leah replied. "But you're going to have to get used

to them. We're going to be living on a cattle ranch, after all."

A shadow crossed Evangeline's face as the reality that they had left Boston far behind sunk in once more, making Leah frown. But she gave her little sister a sly smile.

"But Edgar told me there's a pond behind the house. A pond that's fed by a little river," she said, trying to cheer Evangeline up.

"He said there are always lots of ducks on the pond and sometimes, you can see little fish, too."

"Ducks? Really?" Evangeline asked, immediately brightening. "What about sheep? Do you think there are any sheep on this ranch?"

"Well... I don't rightly know, actually. I never asked him very much about the animals on the ranch."

The train rumbled on and Leah looked out the window at the scenery rolling by.

It was hardscrabble land with endless vistas of green broken up by patches of wildflowers, the riot of colors looking especially vibrant among the sea of grass. Tall craggy peaks loomed large in the distance and red stone mesas dotted the landscape.

It was such a different world than the one they'd left behind. Boston was a growing city full of tall buildings and cobblestone streets. Every modern convenience one could think of could be had—at least, it could for those who had the money.

But the land out here was wild. Untamed. There were long barren stretches of open, empty land. She had never seen anything like it

before and Leah admired the rugged beauty.

The conductor—a tall, broad man with ruddy cheeks, iron-gray hair beneath his conductor's cap, and blue eyes that sparkled with mischief—gave Leah and Evangeline a smile as he stopped at the doorway of their sleeping car.

The private compartment was an extravagance they couldn't really afford, but given that it was a few days from Boston to Coyote Hollow by train, Leah thought it necessary.

Evangeline wasn't thrilled with the idea of coming out west to begin with, so Leah wanted to make sure the trip was at least comfortable. She used the money she'd gotten from the sale of her parents' house to fund their travels and buy them both new dresses for meeting Edgar.

She still had a bit left over but she wanted to make it last. Maybe even put it into savings that would grow over time and when Evangeline was ready for college, there would be enough in the account to send her.

"You ladies gettin' off in Coyote Hollow?" the conductor asked.

"Yes, that's right," Leah said.

He nodded. "All right, that's our next stop," he said. "Are you meeting somebody there?"

"Yes, actually. My—my husband," Leah said, and the word felt strange coming out of her mouth.

They weren't technically married yet, of course. But it seemed easier and safer to refer to Edgar as her husband when a strange

man asked.

And she was going to have to get used to referring to him that way sooner, rather than later.

“That’s good,” the conductor said. “These frontier towns can be rough places, especially for a woman. I’m glad you’re meetin’ somebody there.”

“Thank you, sir,” Leah said. “I appreciate your concern.”

He tipped his cap to her then moved on down the line to let the other passengers know of their impending stop. She looked over at Evangeline and saw her expression darken as a frown touched her lips.

She could see her little sister start to worry and grow afraid as it all suddenly became very real for her. Leah knew exactly how she felt and felt the snakes of worry writhing around inside of her, as well.

“Do you love him?”

Evangeline’s voice pulled her out of her own head and snapped her back to reality. She turned to look at her little sister, confusion coloring her features.

“What?” Leah asked.

“Edgar. Do you love him?”

Leah cleared her throat. “That’s a very complicated question.”

“It’s not, though. You either do or you don’t.”

“It’s not always that black and white, Evangeline. I don’t yet know Edgar so I can’t tell you with absolute certainty how I feel about him,” she explained neutrally. “You know we only met through letters.”

“Which is why this whole thing is so strange to begin with,” Evangeline countered. “I mean, how can you agree to marry somebody you’ve never met?”

“Because—you just can,” Leah replied, not knowing what else to say.

“That’s not a very good answer.”

Leah laughed softly. “Well, when you’re grown up, you’ll understand that there are things you can’t really explain. You just understand them.”

“Being a grown up sounds confusing,” Evangeline said with an exasperated sigh.

Leah nodded. “It really is sometimes,” she murmured softly. “It really is.”

The train was starting to slow—they were getting close to the station. Her heart fluttered and her belly churned as she thought about meeting Edgar for the first time.

But as she sat in her seat, a dark and ominous thought entered her mind. What if Edgar wasn’t there?

Maybe there was no Edgar, and whomever she had been communicating with all those months was somebody playing a terrible prank on her.

If that were the case, what would she and Evangeline do?

“Leah?”

Once again, Evangeline’s voice cut into her thoughts, which were spiraling down a very dark hole. She looked to her little sister and offered a smile she hoped looked more real than it felt.

“What is it?” she asked.

Evangeline huffed and with her brow furrowed, she looked worried. “Do you think Edgar will walk with me in the park? Like our father used to?”

The question hit her like a mule kick to the stomach and Leah didn’t know how to answer it straight away. She feared Evangeline might think she was trying to replace their father with Edgar.

Evangeline had been crazy about their father and to her, the man could do no wrong. Having taken over the role of parent after their deaths, she saw just how irresponsible their father had been—especially when it came to money.

He’d left them penniless and on the brink of starvation. But she’d done what she needed to keep their heads above water, if only just barely.

Knowing how much Evangeline looked up to him, Leah would never do anything to tarnish his image in her eyes. So, no, she wasn’t looking to replace their father, but she could see how her little sister might see it that way.

What Edgar could be, though—and what Leah hoped he’d be—was a father figure to her. Somebody Evangeline could look up to.

Somebody she could admire and who would help her through the tough times like a father would.

“I don’t know if there will be parks like there were in Boston, but I know for sure Edgar is going to do a lot of amazing things with you,” Leah replied.

“He’ll no doubt teach you to ride horses and a host of other fun things I know you’ll like. Doesn’t that sound nice?”

Evangeline seemed to think it over for a moment and then nodded as a smile crept across her lips. “I think I’d like to learn to ride a horse,” she said.

“You and me both.”

The train came to a shuddering stop and let out a loud squealing noise Leah found entirely unpleasant. She looked over at Evangeline and tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear, trying to put on a bright face despite her own doubts and worries.

She wanted Evangeline to think she was unafraid, absolutely certain about taking their lives in this direction.

“Are you ready to start our new adventure?” she asked brightly.

Evangeline smiled and nodded. “I think so.”

“Good girl.”

She took Evangeline’s hand and led her down the passageway to disembark. She took a deep breath and as she stepped to the stairs and descended one by one, her eyes scanning the platform.

And when her gaze fell upon a man who was tall and had shaggy brown hair beneath his Stetson, Leah just knew she was looking at Edgar.

He had broad shoulders and a body that was taut with the corded muscles of a man used to doing physical labor. His skin was tawny, likely from many hours spent in the sun, and as he approached, she could see that his eyes were a light hazel.

And then he was standing before them, his hat in his hands, the sun making his eyes sparkle like gold. He gave her an awkward smile and Leah felt her heart race.

He was far more handsome than she had dared imagine and his smile threatened to melt her there on the train platform.

“L—Leah?” he asked, his voice quiet and uncertain.

She nodded. “Edgar?”

“Yes, ma’am,” he replied.

They stood in a strained silence for a long moment, their eyes locked onto each other’s and the air between them crackling with a tension that crawled across Leah’s skin like tendrils of fire.

A faint smile flickered across her lips as she tried to gather herself. Before she could, though, Evangeline nudged her out of the way and held out her hand.

“I’m Evangeline,” she said.

That broke the trance and Edgar gave her a warm smile as he shook her hand. “Well, hello to you, Evangeline. Your sister’s told

me all about you.”

“And she’s told me a lot about you, as well,” she replied. “She said you put a nest of butterflies in her belly that makes her feel queer.”

“Evangeline,” Leah gasped.

She felt her face turn red with embarrassment and Leah suddenly found herself wishing the ground would open up and swallow her whole. But Edgar squatted down so he was face to face with Evangeline and pitched his voice low, speaking to her almost conspiratorially.

“Well, to be honest, she does the same thing to me,” he said. “So, I guess we’re even on that account.”

Leah blushed even harder and looked away, unable to keep the corners of her mouth from curling upward. Evangeline grinned and nodded.

Leah looked down at her sister, pointedly avoiding Edgar’s gaze.

“He’s nice,” Evangeline said.

Another moment of strained silence passed between them, and when Leah finally managed to look Edgar in the eye again, he smiled. Her heart once again started to race, and she silently chastised herself for acting like such a foolish girl.

But the truth was, no man had ever had that sort of effect on her. Not that she’d had many suitors, but she had known a few boys who’d been interested in her.

And none of them ever turned the swarm of butterflies loose inside

of her the way Edgar did.

“Well, how about we get your bags into the wagon and head out to the ranch?” he asked, breaking the awkward silence.

“That sounds wonderful.”

He nodded. “Great. Then let’s do that,” he said. “Oh, and welcome to Coyote Hollow. I’m glad to have the both of you here.”

They hadn't brought much with them—a steamer trunk for each and a few assorted bags. They had less than Edgar had imagined, what with them packing up their lives and moving across the country.

But he didn't care. They could get what they needed out here.

Sure, Coyote Hollow wasn't as cosmopolitan as a place like Boston, but they could certainly get the basics. They could find whatever they needed.

As the buckboard bounded down the dirt road, he looked back at Evangeline, who was sitting in the rear with the luggage. "How are you doin' back there?" he asked. "You all right?"

Evangeline smiled wide. "This is fun."

Edgar chuckled and glanced at Leah, his heart skipping a beat. With hair that was a deep, rich shade of gold and her alabaster skin, she was stunning.

She had a generous smattering of freckles across the bridge of her nose and eyes that glittered like chips of polished jade. She was far

more beautiful than he'd even imagined.

Edgar wasn't so falsely modest that he didn't know he was a handsome man. But sitting next to Leah made him feel like he wasn't worthy of somebody of such beauty.

More than that, she was an amazing person. Smart, kind, generous, and compassionate—she was, as people liked to say, the whole package.

“How about you?” he asked her. “Are you doing all right?”

She gave him a lopsided smile. “It's a little bumpier than I imagined,” she replied. “But I've never seen land so beautiful. It's simply stunning.”

Edgar was staring at her, committing her features to memory as she spoke, and nodded. “Very, very beautiful.”

Leah blushed and turned away—though not before he saw the smile crossing her face. Edgar had meant that in reference to the land around them, but he understood why Leah thought he was referring to her.

And maybe, deep down, he was.

Edgar was normally not so bold with women. But there was something about Leah that made him feel daring. He felt almost hypnotized by her. Mesmerized.

Granted, he didn't have much experience when it came to women and romance, but he found something about her entirely compelling.

He turned back to the road and racked his brain, trying to think of something to say. He hadn't expected the conversation would be so awkward and strained between them.

They didn't know each other, and without the buffer writing letters provided, Edgar found he didn't know what to say.

It just wasn't the same as being able to take the time to compose his thoughts before committing them to paper. Face to face with her, Edgar found his words failing him.

"So—the train ride," Edgar said, fumbling around for something to talk about. "Was it all right? I mean, were you comfortable?"

Leah gave him a small smile. "It was fine, thank you. I think Evangeline enjoyed it."

"Did you not?"

"Oh no, I just meant the train ride was fine," she said as a nervous giggle escaped her. "We were both comfortable enough."

"Good. That's good," he said, silently kicking himself for such pedestrian conversation.

They rode along in silence for a little while longer as Edgar continued to chastise himself for not having anything useful or interesting to say. As they rode, though, he found himself stealing glances at Leah, which made his heart race every time.

She was even more beautiful than he'd anticipated and Edgar was having a hard time gathering his thoughts. There was something about her that fogged things up in his mind, spun him around and wouldn't let him think straight at all.

In some ways, he was like his father—he wasn't terrific around people to begin with. But seated next to somebody like Leah made it ten times worse. Every time he opened his mouth, he was putting his foot into it.

Edgar cleared his throat and gave her an awkward grin. "I apologize," he said. "I find I'm better able to communicate through writing. It gives me a chance to think about what it is I have to say."

"You don't have anything to apologize for," she said. "I understand completely. And truth be told, I'm much the same way. It's easier to write my thoughts out than it is to actually speak them."

Relief washed through Edgar's body. Not only did she not think him dim, she actually related to him in that way. It made him feel better about the situation.

"I think, over time, as we get to know each other, we'll find conversation easier," Leah went on. "We're in a strange place, only having just met each other."

"That's what I believe, as well. And I'm looking forward to getting to know you—I mean, more than what I've learned through our letters."

She gave him a soft smile. "I'm looking forward to that, as well."

"Umm... before we get to the ranch, I suppose I should tell you that I had everything arranged for us to be married this evening," he said.

"This evening?"

He nodded. "Yeah. I just thought we might want to just go ahead and say our vows and get on with things."

"I mean, since you came all the way out here, I assume you're serious about marryin' and I didn't think there was any reason to wait..."

He let his words trail off, realizing he was babbling and sounding like an idiot. He watched her reaction closely, fearing that he'd overstepped by making the arrangements without consulting her.

"If you want to wait, that's perfectly fine—"

"No, it's all right," she said. "It just took me by surprise. I mean, we're going to be married. It's really happening. It's just a lot to take in all at once."

He nodded. "It is. And I apologize for droppin' it on you like that. Like I said, if you'd rather we put it off a couple of days, let you get settled in—"

"No, it's fine. Honestly, it's probably best we just jump in, right?" she agreed with a nervous smile. "I came out here to marry you, so there's no sense in waiting."

"That was kind of my thought, too," he said. "But again, if you'd be more comfortable putting it off—"

"Nonsense. If you've already gone to the trouble of arranging it all, I see no reason to delay," she replied.

He looked over at her and although nervousness was clearly etched into her features, there was also a glimmer of excitement. He held onto that, using it to soothe his own nerves.

As scared as he was about all of this, he, too, was excited and hopeful for a future with her. On paper, she was everything he imagined he could ever want in a partner, and even though he knew it would take time for them to develop feelings for one another, let alone love each other, Edgar was hopeful.

Like his father, he could sometimes be pessimistic and only see the dark and the gloom life had to offer. But other times, he was more like his mother, who saw the good in the world and in people.

She refused to give into despair and rejected the darkness. She saw the world through the eyes of an optimist and that was something Edgar had always admired about her.

It was also something he tried to emulate—with mixed success.

“Are ya sure?” he asked, giving her one last chance to back out.

“I’m certain. I came here to marry you, Edgar,” she said. “And I intend to do just that.”

He smiled and nodded. “All right, then.”

He guided the horses to follow the long road that split off the main thoroughfare. It led through the pastures of cows on either side of them and would take them down to the grounds the main house and the rest of the outbuildings rested upon.

“I told you cows stink,” Evangeline piped up from the back. “They smell awful.”

“Evangeline,” Leah scolded her.

“It’s fine. She’s right, they do smell awful,” he said with a smile. “It

don't stink as bad up by the house. Once we clear the fields, it should start smellin' better."

"I hope so," Evangeline said. "This is really terrible."

"Evangeline, don't be rude," Leah admonished her.

"I was just telling the truth," she grumbled her reply.

"It's awful, I know," Edgar said to Leah. "But in a few days or so, you'll be so used to it, you won't even notice it."

Leah gave him a beatific smile and leaned close to avoid being heard by her sister. "I certainly hope so. It really is horrible."

Edgar burst into laughter and smiled like he'd gone mad. He pulled the buckboard to a stop in front of the stairs that led to the main house and hopped down off the bench.

Turning around, he first lifted Evangeline out of the back, then helped Leah down from the bench. By the time he'd set her down, Cecilia and Alberto were standing there, wide smiles on their faces.

Evangeline stepped closer to her sister, sidling behind her skirts, a nervous expression on her face.

"Leah, Evangeline, this is Cecilia and Alberto," Edgar introduced them. "They both work here and live in those outbuildings over there. They've both been here a long time."

Edgar stepped back and let them all introduce themselves to each other. He could see in Cecilia's face that she already liked Leah a lot.

It mostly had to do with the letters she'd written and what she'd said. Leah came across very well in her letters—intelligent, articulate, self-effacing, compassionate, and kind.

Cecilia had been the closest thing he'd had to a mother figure for much of his life and her approval meant a lot to him.

"Ducks!"

They all turned and watched as Evangeline sprinted off toward the pond behind the house. From where they stood, Edgar could see half a dozen of the birds floating on the surface of the water.

Leah grumbled under her breath and gave him an apologetic smile. "I'm sorry. I'll go fetch her—"

Edgar shook his head and smiled. "It's all right. Let her play a bit. I want her to be comfortable here," he said. "And since she obviously has an affection for ducks, let's let her get to know them first."

Leah offered him a grateful smile. "I'm certain she'll be making herself at home here in short order."

"Good. That's what I hope for," he replied. "Because this is your home and everything in it is yours as well as mine."

"Father Kerrigan will be here in an hour or so, Mr. Edgar," Cecilia said.

He nodded but couldn't take his eyes off Evangeline frolicking down by the edge of the pond, laughing and waving at the ducks. It was adorable. He finally turned back to Cecilia and offered her a smile.

Father Kerrigan had taken over the Coyote Hollow church about seven years ago, when Father Morgan passed away in his sleep. Father Kerrigan was a good man with a good heart and did all he could for his flock. He was going to be overseeing their vows and would officially marry them.

The thought that it was less than an hour away sent a rush of nervous energy through him. Reality was beginning to settle down over his shoulders and it jolted him.

He cut a glance at Leah, who seemed to be reading his mind, and saw her smile. She was stifling a laugh and he knew he probably deserved it.

“Cecilia, can you please help Leah dress and prepare?” he asked softly.

“It would be my pleasure, Mr. Edgar,” she said, then turned to Leah. “Now, let us go make you the most beautiful bride in the history of marriage.”

Leah turned to him and smiled. “I suppose I’ll see you in an hour.”

“Looking forward to it.”

“You and me both,” he replied, then turned to Cecilia. “Amon?”

A shadow crossed her face and she gave him a slight shake of the head. Edgar pursed his lips and fought off the waves of anger and disappointment that washed through him.

He wasn’t expecting his father to attend—not after he’d made his feelings on the subject of Edgar getting married abundantly clear. But Edgar would have been lying if he said it didn’t still sting a bit.

He gave himself a small shake and vowed to not let it ruin the day.

Cecilia escorted Leah—who was calling to Evangeline to come—off and into the house, where she would set her up in her own room then help her get dressed.

The ranch house had started off small but had grown over the years as the family continued building onto it. There were far more rooms than people living within the walls—a byproduct of a time when Edgar's father and mother had believed they were going to have a whole passel of children.

Now, most of those rooms stood empty. Edgar was still building a small house on the property for his father to use but until it was ready, he was staying mostly in his room and keeping to himself.

He would eventually run into Leah and Evangeline, though, and all Edgar could do was try to soften the blow by preparing them as thoroughly as he could.

"Everythin' is set up how you asked for it, Mr. Edgar."

Alberto's voice pulled him back into the moment and he nodded. "Excellent. Thank you, Alberto. I appreciate all of your aid in this."

"Of course," the older man replied.

"All right. Well, I suppose I should go and get ready myself."

Alberto nodded and gave him a warm smile. "She seems to be a nice girl," he said. "I had my doubts but it looks like you picked a good one, mi amigo."

"Yeah. I think I may have found a very good one."

The next hour passed by in a flash but Edgar managed to get himself cleaned up, into his best suit, and out onto the area he'd had Alberto set up for the small ceremony.

Alberto was good with his hands and had built them a decorative arch covered in flowers that he'd set up on the edge of the pond. Father Kerrigan stood beneath the arch, waiting patiently, and Alberto stood beside Edgar as his best man.

When the back doors of the house opened and Leah stepped out, Edgar felt as if the breath had been stolen from his lungs. She wore a white gown that seemed to glow upon her skin.

The sunlight caught the small gems that had been woven into the fabric, making her shimmer as she walked, and a gauzy veil hung over her face. Leah's golden hair was tied back and seemed to accent her smooth, pale skin and the glittering white fabric of the dress perfectly.

Wearing a blue silk dress, Evangeline walked beside her, a wide smile on her face, and Cecilia brought up the rear of the small procession. Edgar watched Leah walking toward him in a stunned silence, unable to move, unable to speak—he wasn't even sure he was breathing.

And when she stepped up beside him, he just stood there staring at her for a long moment. Even beneath the veil, he could see that she was blushing. It was as if she didn't realize just how beautiful she was.

“Edgar?”

He looked to the pastor with a dumbfounded look on his face.
“Yes?”

“The veil?”

He looked from the pastor to Leah and shook his head, his own face flaring with heat as he realized his mistake.

“Right,” he said. “Sorry.”

Leah laughed softly as Edgar lifted the veil and took in her beauty once more. His heart rippled with anticipation and his throat was dry.

But he managed to work up a little moisture in his mouth—just enough to speak. “You look amazing,” he said quietly. “That dress —”

“It belonged to my mother. She was married in it.”

Edgar smiled. “Well, it is stunning. You’re stunning in it.”

They both turned to face Father Kerrigan, who gave them a fond smile.

“Let us begin,” the pastor said.

Leah walked back into the house with Edgar by her side. The ceremony was a quick affair, with Father Kerrigan reciting the words by rote.

They didn't have time to write vows or anything like that, but once he had pronounced them man and wife, Edgar had given her a chaste kiss. She appreciated that he didn't try to use his position as her husband to force her to do something she wasn't ready for just yet.

In fact, he'd gone out of his way to make sure both she and Evangeline each had their own bedrooms. Edgar had told her that he would not share a bed with her until she was ready and that he was willing to wait however long that took.

She appreciated that more than she could say. Most men she'd known would have made her consummate their marriage on their wedding night.

The sort of men who'd been in her life back in Boston had no sense of decency or seemed to care about the feelings of a woman. Edgar was different, though.

He seemed to know what she needed before she did and he bent over backwards to accommodate her. He'd said he wanted her to be comfortable there and so far, she had been.

That he was so open to her needs and wants and didn't force her into positions that she wasn't ready to be in spoke volumes about the kind of man he was. He was kind and he was generous.

More than that, he treated Leah with a respect and deference that was uncommon in most men. He actually took her feelings into account, and that filled her with a sense of gratitude deeper than any ocean.

"So? How do you feel being Mrs. Edgar Thompson now?" Cecilia asked.

Leah smiled. "To be honest, it's all happened so suddenly, I haven't had time to really wrap my mind around everything just yet."

Cecilia smiled and nodded. "I understand. Your situation is—different," she said. "I did not know these sorts of arrangements could be made through a catalog."

"Neither did I, until my friend showed me one and made me promise to look through it."

"Well, it seems your friend did you a great service," Cecilia said. "But maybe more so for Mr. Edgar. He's a good man who has needed a good woman in his life for a long time now. And here you are."

Leah smiled and felt her cheeks flush with warmth. She had never been good about accepting compliments. It just felt wrong to her somehow.

She didn't do things for the compliments or the gratitude. She just did things because they needed to be done. She never expected praise or a kind word.

But a part of her appreciated them all the same. She just didn't know how to acknowledge it.

"If you'll excuse me, Mrs. Edgar," Cecilia said. "I need to finish getting dinner ready."

"Of course. Thank you, Cecilia. For everything."

The older woman smiled at her. "Of course. You're family now."

The woman turned and headed toward the kitchen, leaving Leah and Evangeline alone in the formal sitting room with Edgar and Alberto, who were engaged in a conversation about the ranch.

Cecilia and Alberto both seemed like good people. They genuinely seemed to care about Edgar and were more like family than the help.

Leah could see by the way he looked at her that Edgar saw Cecilia as something of a mother figure. And judging by her demeanor, it was a role she was more than happy to take on.

"What do you think, Evangeline?" she asked. "This is a nice place, isn't it?"

Her smile was wide, but Leah knew her sister well enough to know when she was holding something back. Evangeline usually did it for her sake, she knew.

But there was also a glimmer of excitement blended in with her

reticence. Evangeline acted as if this was an adventure.

Leah enjoyed seeing her little sister laughing and enjoying all the new and different things she'd never experienced before. As Leah was, as well.

"It is nice here. I especially like the pond with all the ducks," she replied.

"Just wait until you see the horses," Edgar said. "And all of the pigs."

Evangeline gave him a smile. "What about sheep? Do you have any sheep?"

"Well, first of all, it's *we* now. We're a family," Edgar said. "And we don't have sheep, but we can certainly look into getting some. How'd that be?"

Leah could immediately feel her little sister stiffen up beside her and a dark expression crossed her face. Leah knew her well enough to know she hadn't taken Edgar's words in the spirit they were intended.

Evangeline's mind went directly to thinking Edgar was suggesting he would try to replace their father. Leah knew that wasn't what he'd meant, but to a sensitive girl in a vulnerable state like her little sister, that was what Evangeline heard.

Leah opened her mouth to say something to defuse the situation, but as if he could read the thoughts going through her little sister's mind, Edgar beat her to it.

"Don't take that the wrong way. I know I could never replace your

father and I'd never even try. Ever," he said softly. "What I meant was that we've all lost people in life.

"I lost my mother; you lost your parents. And yet, we all found our way to each other, anyway. Now Leah and I are married, and our two families have become one.

"So, I'm not trying to replace your father. I'm simply trying to widen your definition of family. Does that make sense?"

Evangeline considered this for a moment then nodded, her smile growing wide as she looked at Edgar. "I think I understand," she said brightly. "That makes sense to me."

Edgar nodded. "That's good. I'm glad," he replied. "I'm glad you and Leah are both part of my family. I'm happy that we're all together."

"Me too," Evangeline said, bringing a smile to all their faces.

"Speaking of family," Leah said. "I'm already very fond of Cecilia and Alberto, but where is your father?"

She immediately knew she'd said something wrong because Edgar's face darkened. His expression grew pinched, and a frown touched his lips.

Edgar drew inward for a long moment but came out of it quickly, looking less angry and more resigned. "I guess my father won't be joining us this evening. He—"

Just as he was speaking the words, the front door opened and a tall, bony man stood just inside the doorway. He was covered in filth, as if he'd just come in from a long day in the fields.

He looked at Edgar with something like contempt upon his face, and then he turned to Leah. She got to her feet quickly and extended her hand.

“Mr. Thompson, it’s nice to finally meet you. I’ve heard a lot—”

The older man chuffed and ignored her outstretched hand. Instead, he walked over to the bar set against the far wall and poured himself a generous drink.

Leah withdrew her hand and sat back down, feeling utterly stupid and humiliated. Even worse, the older man’s snub made her feel guilty.

What she was feeling guilt for, she had no idea, but Leah was always quick to take the blame for everything. It was just sort of ingrained into her by now.

“Father,” Edgar growled, his voice low and hard. “It’s my wedding day. I know it goes against your nature, but try to be respectful.”

“Wedding day,” the older man grumbled.

“Pa, this is Leah and her sister Evangeline,” Edgar tried again, but to no avail.

The older man ignored him, too, and Edgar got to his feet. He walked over to where his father was at the sideboard. Edgar was a few inches taller than his father and had at least fifty pounds on him.

As Edgar pointed to her and Evangeline, a nervous current flowed through Leah and her stomach grew queasy. It felt like greasy snakes filled her belly and were writhing around on top of each

other.

Leah didn't know what it was she had done, exactly, but the older man had obviously taken offense to it. "Mr. Thompson, I'm sorry for any—"

"You didn't do anything," Edgar cut her off. "This is just how he is."

His father seemed miserable, and Leah's heart went out to him. But he also seemed unreasonably angry—at her, for some reason.

Edgar could excuse it as much as he wanted, but Leah knew when somebody didn't like her. When somebody was hostile. And she was getting that feeling in spades from Edgar's father.

"Dinner is ready," Cecilia called in a sing-song voice. "Let's have the bride and groom come take their places at the table."

Edgar gave his father a hard look before he turned and came over to Leah and extended his hand. She cast one last look at his father before she took Edgar's hand and got to her feet.

She let him lead her over to the table, where he pulled a chair out for her. She tried to give him a smile, but it felt wooden and false. He sat down next to her and offered her an apologetic expression.

"I'm sorry," he said softly. "I—"

"You have nothing to apologize for. I know it isn't you."

Quietly, Evangeline sat down next to Leah. She knew her little sister was picking up on and reacting to all the tension in the air.

Leah wished she could soothe and comfort Evangeline, but she didn't want to seem disrespectful at the table. Besides, she could tell Edgar's father was already on a razor's edge and a push one way or the other could be disastrous.

And even though it wasn't traditional, it was still her wedding day. Leah didn't want it ruined because of one angry man.

The tension remained thick and the conversation minimal as the plates of food were passed around. Everybody was subdued and Leah felt like Edgar's father was an anchor that was dragging them all down beneath the surface.

He sat hunched over his plate, stabbing his food with his fork and silently shoveling it into his mouth. She'd never known that a man could eat angrily but Edgar's father had apparently mastered the art.

Cecilia offered her a warm smile and picked up her glass of wine. "I would like to offer a toast to the new couple," she said. "May your lives and your love be long and prosperous—"

"Tell me somethin'—whatever your name is," Amon growled. "You ever worked a ranch before? Hell, you ever been on a workin' ranch before?"

"Father," Edgar snapped, "not now."

He scoffed. "My table. My house. I'll make conversation anytime I damn well please."

Leah set her fork down gently and the strain in the air over the table only grew heavier. She wiped her mouth with a napkin and looked at the older man.

“No. To both questions,” she said softly. “I’ve never been on a working ranch before. And I’ve never worked a ranch before. But I’m a very quick learner and I look forward to—”

“Bah,” Amon cut her off with a wave of his hand. “You don’t know nothin’. There are a thousand different things that can kill you out there.

“There are a thousand different ways you can die. And if you ain’t ever worked a ranch before, odds are you will die out there.”

“That’s enough,” Edgar snapped.

“No, it ain’t. She needs to know what she’s in for,” Amon pressed. “You’ve had it good up in your big city all your life. But life out here on the frontier ain’t that easy.

“It’s hard, little girl. You can work all season only to have your crops wiped out by a storm. You can be workin’ in your field and get yourself bit by a rattler. There ain’t no promises or guarantees out here.

“Workin’ the frontier is hard, bone-breakin’ work, and if you ain’t ever done it before and ain’t prepared for the toll it’ll take on you, your life is gonna be one endless string of sufferin’ and misery. You can bet on that, little girl.”

Leah lifted her chin slightly during his tirade, showing her defiance. She glared at Amon, and though she was terrified of him, she wasn’t about to let him intimidate her.

She wasn’t going to give in to his anger and force her to cower. She was strong and tough—more so than he realized. And she was not going to let him push her around.

“Sir, I worked in a factory for ten hours a day, usually six days a week. Sometimes seven. I know what hard work is and I’ve never feared it,” she growled back at him.

“I may not know what is entailed in working a ranch, but I’m smart and my work ethic is sound. There is not one task on this ranch I won’t be able to do. You’ll see.”

Amon waved her off. “You don’t know nothin’ about hard work. A factory’s nothin’ compared to—”

Edgar shot to his feet and cut his father off. “Enough,” he roared. “I’m not going to have you ruin this night for me. Not like you’ve ruined so many others.”

“Too late,” Evangeline croaked.

Leah watched as her little sister bolted from the table, tears flowing freely down her face. She turned and glared at Amon again, making sure he knew he was responsible for Evangeline’s hasty departure.

Cecilia took her hand and gave it a squeeze, offering her an apologetic expression. Even Alberto remained silent and looked uncomfortable.

Everybody seemed to make a habit of apologizing for Amon Thompson when he was the monster who should be apologizing for his own boorish manners.

Leah got to her feet, never taking her eyes off Amon. Her jaw was clenched and her face burned with anger.

“Thank you for a lovely evening,” she spat.

Leah left the table and rushed down the hallway to comfort her sister. Evangeline already had reservations about coming here and this episode was going to make it a much harder sell to her.

But there was no plan B. This was it. If they couldn't make it work, they had nowhere else to go. Leah wasn't going to put that weight on her sister's shoulders, but it was the truth.

They would find a way to make this work. They had to.

“**A**re you proud of yourself for making an eight-year-old girl cry, Pa? Does that make you feel like a man?” Edgar roared. “Because that’s what you did.

“You made an eight-year-old girl cry. Do you feel good about that?”

“I was tryin’ to prepare her for what life out here is really like,” he growled.

“I don’t know what’s screwed up in her brain to make her do something like up and marry a man she found in a catalog, but here we are. And she needs to know it’s rough out here. She needs to—”

“What she needs is for you to stop terrorizing her,” Edgar shouted. “She needs for you to stop bein’—well, this. She needs support and love from her family.”

“She ain’t my family.”

“Yeah, actually she is,” Edgar pointed out. “I married her, Pa. She’s family now.”

Amon ignored him as he continued shoveling food into his mouth. Cecilia gave Edgar a look and he shrugged. She looked sad for him.

Alberto got to his feet and loaded up his plate before disappearing into the kitchen. Edgar didn't blame the man for fleeing the tension in the room. If he could have, Edgar knew he probably would have, too.

Cecilia started to clear the plates from the table, carrying them into the kitchen. The wedding dinner was ruined, thanks to his father.

"Couldn't you just let me have this one night?" Edgar grumbled. "One night where you didn't act like a total jackass?"

Amon looked up from his plate, anger flashing dangerously in his eyes. Edgar had clashed with his father for years. Ever since his mother died, they hadn't really gotten along.

They just didn't seem to like each other much anymore. Edgar continued to hold out hope that his father—the one he grew up with and cherished, the man he'd once thought of as his hero—would return and expel the monster posing as his father.

Once upon a time, his father had been a good and decent man. He'd worked hard and provided for his family. He'd taught Edgar everything he knew about running a ranch and the business of it.

But that had all changed when his mother died. His father had grown cold and distant, angry and bitter.

"I didn't say nothin' that wasn't true. And you know that, boy."

Edgar shook his head and walked away from his father. Amon had succeeded in ruining the one night of Edgar's life he'd wanted to be

special. To be perfect.

The anger that coursed through him was deep and thick. Liquid fire was flowing through his veins, and Edgar knew if he didn't walk away right then and there, he was going to do something both of them would come to regret. And he didn't want that.

Despite everything, Edgar believed the good man was still somewhere inside his father and he was giving him every chance possible to let that good man out.

To be the man Edgar once knew and respected. Cherished, even.

Cecilia had told him once that the man his father used to be was gone. Forever. She'd said the death of his mother had changed him in ways there was no coming back from.

Edgar refused to accept it. He wanted to believe his father would eventually come around and be that man again. But with every day that passed with no sign of him coming out of it, the more Edgar lost hope that it was going to happen.

He was clutching at a frayed rope as it was and he knew the slightest breeze would send him tumbling over the cliff, where the only things he could find to hold onto were his anger and his burgeoning hatred for his father.

Edgar stepped outside and drew a deep, cleansing breath. He let the night air fill his lungs and soothe his skin, warm from the rage bubbling beneath the surface.

In the darkness, he could see the silhouettes of Evangeline and Leah sitting beneath the old willow tree that sat at the edge of the pond.

He considered it, wondering if it would be best for him to leave them alone or to go and speak with them—if only for a moment. He decided he wanted to apologize to the both of them.

He stood where he was, listening to them. Evangeline was crying and Leah was doing all she could to console her. It pulled at his heartstrings and deepened his anger at his father for upsetting her this much.

“I want to go home,” Evangeline said. “I don’t want to be here anymore.”

“I know you do, honey,” Leah replied softly. “But this is our home now. I know Amon said some terrible things, but he’ll come around. You’ll see.

“I’m sure he’s not as mean as he seems. But just like this is all new for us, this is all new for him, too. It’s just going to take a little time before we all get used to each other.”

“I don’t want to give it time. He’s a monster,” Evangeline spat. “I want Ma and Pa. I miss them so much.”

Leah sighed. “I miss them, too. Every day. And I know for a fact they would want me to give you the best life I possibly can.

“And that chance is here. Not in Boston. Our lives there were horrible, Evangeline. You know that.”

“They’d want me to be happy,” she said. “And I’m not happy here.”

“Not right now, I know you’re not. It’s going to take a little time, but I know you’ll be happy here. You just need to give it a little bit of time. That’s all.”

Edgar knew he probably shouldn't be eavesdropping, but it was helpful to him to know where their hearts and minds were. After a couple of minutes of listening to them, he stepped over to where they were and sat down next to Leah.

She offered him a small smile and a subtle shake of the head. He glanced at Evangeline and saw the silvery luminescence of the moon above glittering along the trails of tears that rolled down her cheeks.

"I'm sorry, Evangeline. I probably should have warned you both about him. He's a monster," Edgar said. "Can you forgive me?"

Evangeline looked at him and the expression on her face was one of pure misery. It broke his heart to see it and he would have given anything in that moment to erase it.

But his father had created the mess and it was up to him to clean it up.

"I really am sorry, Evangeline," he said. "I assumed he wasn't coming."

"It's not your fault," she replied. "It's his fault. He's the one who should be apologizing."

A rueful smile touched his lips. "Yeah, well, unfortunately for us, what should be and what is rarely meet. So, we're left to do the best we can," he said.

"In this case, that means apologizin' to you and makin' sure you're all right."

She offered him a smile that almost looked real. In that situation,

he was all right with it. She deserved to be honest about her feelings.

Edgar never wanted her to pull her punches. He would rather take brutal honesty than a honey-coated lie any day of the week and twice on Sundays.

Evangeline wiped her eyes and sniffed loudly. "Even though it's not your place to apologize, I accept," she said. "And thank you."

"Of course," he said.

The three of them sat in a companionable silence for a while as the tension that still hung in the air slowly dissipated. Edgar liked Evangeline. She was strong. Tough. She was like her sister that way.

And he hated seeing her upset because of his father. He wanted her to be comfortable there and to learn to love all that Coyote Hollow had to offer.

As long as Edgar's father was there, making trouble and being his usual irascible self, that would be a lot more difficult. But he was going to try to make life for Evangeline one that was happy and fun.

He wanted her to learn to be a kid again.

"I know this is going to be a big adjustment. For all of us," Edgar said. "But I really believe you will be happy here. Both of you."

"Evangeline, we'll teach you to ride horses. We'll teach you to do a lot of fun things. And there are a lot of kids your age in town."

“Once school starts, you’ll make friends and things will turn around. I promise you that.”

She looked at him with a quavering smile. “Can we get some sheep?”

Leah laughed. “What is this obsession with sheep?”

“They’re cute,” she replied. “And I’ve never had a pet of my own.”

“Wouldn’t you rather have a dog? Or a cat, maybe?” Leah offered.

Evangeline shook her head. “I’d rather have a sheep.”

“Sheep it is,” Edgar said. “We’ll make arrangements for you to have some sheep.”

Her smile was a little bit wider and a little more genuine this time and it made Edgar glad.

If the price of her happiness was a couple head of sheep, it was a small amount to pay—there was no true price you could put on it. And he wanted to see her happy.

Leah looked at him with gratitude in her eyes and he gave her a smile.

“Tell you what,” he said. “Why don’t we go back inside. I’ll have Cecilia bring some trays of food into your rooms and we’ll have a picnic.

“There’s no sense in letting all that good food go to waste. Especially Cecilia’s special desserts. Those, we definitely need to eat. Come on, it’ll be fun.”

They both smiled at him and Edgar felt his heart melt. They were so different and yet so very similar in a lot of ways—their smiles being one of them.

“That sounds fun,” Evangeline said.

“Yes, that does sound like fun,” Leah added.

“Good. Then it’s a plan.”

They all got to their feet and Evangeline raced ahead, stepping into the kitchen through the back door. As they walked to the house, Edgar could hear Evangeline chattering away excitedly with Cecilia.

It sounded to him like they were discussing names for her sheep. It made him laugh softly.

“Thank you,” Leah said. “You really turned her night around.”

Edgar offered her a small, apologetic smile. “She deserves a chance to be a kid,” he said.

“She should never have to deal with somebody like my father. And I promise you that I will do my best to shield her from him from now on.”

She stopped and turned toward him. Her expression was sad, but he could still see the sparkle of hope in her eyes. “You know this isn’t your fault, don’t you?” she asked.

He shrugged. “It’s my father, which means it’s my mess to clean up,” he said. “And I am truly sorry for his behavior. He was... out of line. To say the least.”

Leah pursed her lips. "You shouldn't have to apologize for him. I hate that you have to shoulder that burden," she said softly. "You shouldn't have to do that."

"And you shouldn't have had to do all you've done for Evangeline. You definitely shouldn't have had to shoulder the burden you did," he replied. "And Evangeline shouldn't have to give up her entire childhood."

"Well, apparently she's not, since she's getting sheep."

Edgar laughed softly. "A price I'd pay in a heartbeat just to make her smile."

Leah looked at him for a long moment and he could see the wheels turning in her mind. He wondered what it was she was thinking. Especially when her expression darkened.

"Your father is right, though. I don't know anything about working a ranch," she said.

"It's going to take some time for me to do what needs to be done around here. I fully intend to carry my weight and do my part; I just need to learn."

"And I'll teach you everything you need to know," he said. "Maybe we're mad for doing this. But we're in this together now and I'm going to do everything I can to make sure you're prepared."

"This is our family now, Leah. When one of us succeeds, we all succeed."

She reached out and gently laid a hand on his cheek. Edgar melted into her touch and smiled.

“You’re a good man, Edgar Thompson.”

“Every once in a while, perhaps.”

She shook her head. “No. I think all the time.”

A different sort of tension arose in the air between them, and Edgar felt it crackling along his skin. His heart swelled and he was overcome by a powerful sense of longing.

But he knew Leah wasn’t ready, and so he kept himself in check.

She leaned forward and planted a soft kiss on his cheek, and when she pulled back, his cheek felt as if it were burning where her lips had touched his skin. It wasn’t an unpleasant feeling.

“Thank you, Edgar. For everything.”

He gave her a smile. “Like I said, we’re in this together now.”

Amon watched his son storm off, chasing down that woman and her little sister, and sighed heavily. He shook his head and wiped his mouth with his napkin, then dropped it on the table.

After carrying his plate into the kitchen, Amon set it down on the counter next to the wash basin as Cecilia busied herself cleaning everything up.

She didn't say a word to him, nor would she even look his way. Amon could feel the tension and anger radiating off her like heat from the old potbelly stove in the corner.

She'd always been protective of Edgar; she was like Geraldine that way. They both thought he was too tough on his son and that he should have spent more time trying to nurture him, rather than try to toughen him up.

That was the thing neither Geraldine nor Cecilia understood.

The land they lived on was a tough, hard land. It could be brutal, and he hadn't been lying when he'd told that young woman there were a thousand ways to die.

To survive out there, you had to be as hard as the land. As unyielding and as unbreakable. You needed to be strong.

Nurturing and coddling people wasn't going to help them survive. It was only going to make them soft and more likely to die in this place. And neither of them understood that.

"Thank you for dinner, Cecilia," he said. "It was delicious."

"It would have been nice if Mr. Edgar and Miss Leah got to enjoy their wedding dinner. Don't you think?"

Amon tamped down the anger surging inside of him. Cecilia had always been blunt and spoke her mind. He actually appreciated that about her. But on this matter, he didn't feel her opinion mattered.

In the end, Edgar was his son, and it was his responsibility to raise him right. To help him make sound decisions.

Edgar hadn't done that by deciding to get himself married—something he hadn't bothered to discuss with Amon until the wheels were already in motion and it was too late to stop it.

That told Amon that Edgar had known he wouldn't approve, known Amon would order his son to stop the foolishness and forget about getting married.

"I think it was damn stupid for him to get himself married in the first place," Amon snapped.

"That's not for you to say, Amon," Cecilia chided. "Mr. Edgar is a grown man. He can make decisions for himself. Did you not raise him to do this? To have an independent mind?"

“Yeah, when he’s usin’ that independent mind to make good decisions.”

Cecilia set the plate down in the sink and turned to him. He could see she disapproved of his outburst at the table—and his continuing attitude about it. But that was all right.

While Amon usually valued her insight into things, this was a situation where she had no say. Although she’d helped raise him after Geraldine passed on, the simple fact of the matter was that Edgar was his son.

He knew what was best for his son. Not her.

“Mr. Amon, just because you don’t agree with his decision doesn’t make it a bad one,” Cecilia pressed. “Mr. Edgar is young. He has much life ahead of him.

“Do you want him to have to spend it miserable and alone? Is that what you want? For him to turn out like you?”

Her words cut through him like a scythe through wheat. She’d stung Amon right down to the core. He scowled at her, but Cecilia stood there, chin raised in defiance, her eyes boring into his.

She was unafraid of him and would say whatever was on her mind. She’d been that way from day one. It was something he admired about her, but it was annoying him at the moment.

“I’m not miserable,” he grouched.

“Mr. Amon, you’re miserable from the moment you wake up in the morning to the moment you lay down to sleep,” she fired back. “I’d even say you’re miserable when you sleep.”

“You’re awfully flippant today.”

She shrugged. “You don’t pay me to keep my mouth shut. I remember when you first hire me, you say you want me to speak my mind—”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” he snapped, waving her off. “I remember what I said. It’s something I’m regretting right now.”

“Mr. Edgar is choosing to be happy,” she said. “He’s choosing to hope. That is a good thing, Mr. Amon. You should be encouraging him instead of ruining his wedding day with your misery.”

“Watch your tongue, Cecilia,” he said, his temper flaring. “I’ve tolerated you speakin’ up all this time but I’m not without my limits.”

They just stood there in silence, their gazes locked, engaged in a silent stand-off for several long moments. Cecilia was going to hold firm in her convictions, same as he was.

But he could see her struggling to stay her tongue. She seemed to be fighting to keep herself from saying something he would probably construe as disrespectful, but she’d consider honesty.

Amon was big enough to admit that the truth of it probably fell somewhere in the middle. His convictions and hers were just... different. That was all.

“Miss Leah is very good woman. She’s smart. Capable. She’s clever,” Cecilia said. “And she will treat your son very well.”

“You can tell that from the couple of hours you’ve known her, huh?”

Cecilia shrugged. “Mr. Edgar let me read her letters to him. She’s a good woman, Mr. Amon. I don’t want to see you scare her off.

“You’d be ruining not just her life and your son’s, but also that little girl that’s with her. And Evangeline is a precious angel. She doesn’t deserve to have you ruin her life.”

“I’m not ruinin’ anybody’s life. I’m simply pointin’ out some facts.”

“No, you’re expressing your opinion,” Cecilia fired back. “And your opinion was formed out of your sadness and your grief. That is not your son’s burden to carry, Mr. Amon.”

“Bah,” he grumbled and waved her off.

Amon was tired of this conversation so he turned away and headed for the stairs that would take him to his room on the second floor, without waiting for her to say anything else. She obviously had nothing interesting to say.

“Do not ruin your son’s wedding, Mr. Amon,” she called after him. “Give him the chance to be happy. To be in love. Don’t let your own grief steal those things from him.”

Amon climbed the stairs, feeling the searing pain in his knees and back that he sometimes got. Time, as it always did, marched on but he was having a difficult time keeping up.

He felt like he was getting old and might need to move down into one of the bedrooms on the ground floor at some point soon—the mere thought of it was humbling.

It reminded him of his age and the fact that he was nearing the end of his days in this world.

In his bedroom, Amon slammed the door behind him. It wasn't just his pride that was keeping him in that bedroom upstairs. It was the memories, the ghost of a woman long dead.

Amon walked over to Geraldine's dressing table. Everything had been left exactly as it had been the day she died.

He hadn't moved her belongings, nor would he. All of her clothes still hung in the wardrobe and he never slept on her side of the bed.

In some ways, he liked to think she was still with him. That she'd never left. Not fully, anyway. He liked to believe she was looking in on him and trying to help him understand what he was going through.

Amon missed her. More than he could even begin to express. He grieved for her every single day of his life.

He didn't think that made him miserable, as Cecilia said. He thought that simply made him human. You don't just lose the love of your life and not feel it. Intensely. And for a long while.

He looked at the bed and frowned as those old familiar feelings of grief and loneliness washed over him once more. It was always in the dead of night when he missed her the most.

When the entire world around him was quiet and still, he liked to think he could hear her voice. It brought him some small measure of comfort, but the bed was just too large for him alone. Too large without her.

And because it was, it only highlighted the fact that he was alone and without the love of his life all over again. It was that way

every single night and it hadn't gotten better.

Whoever said that time healed all wounds was a fool or a liar, as far as Amon was concerned.

He reached down and picked up the small bottle of perfume he'd gotten for her so long ago. There was still a small bit of liquid in the bottom of it.

He'd used it sparingly over the years but, like everything else, it was disappearing on him. Edgar dabbed a small bit of the perfume onto his pillows, then readied himself for bed.

And when he was done, he laid down in bed, resting his head on the pillows. As he drifted off to sleep, it was with the scent of lilacs filling his nose.

Excited to start the day and eager to prove her worth, Leah

bounded out of bed as the sun was just cresting the horizon. She stepped outside and took a long, deep breath of the crisp morning air.

The inky darkness of the night was giving way to the day. Fingers of fiery red and orange stretched across the sky, pushing back the night and bathing the land around them in a golden light.

The high, craggy peaks of the mountains stood silhouetted in the distance, tall and imposing. Leah thought it was the most beautiful sunrise she'd ever seen in her life.

It was different than the sunrises in Boston, where the sky was mostly obscured by tall buildings and the haze of smoke from all the factories around the city.

The coloring of the sky in Colorado was vibrant. Vivid. The air smelled cleaner and crisper than it did in Boston, and there was just a natural energy about the place that Leah found intoxicating.

As the birds in the trees nearby started to stir, filling the air with their song, Leah smiled. She recalled that most mornings for her

used to start with the rumbling of wagons and the shouting of the delivery men, bakers, and others who rose with the sun.

But out there in the wild and untamed land of Colorado, Leah heard nothing but the chirping of the birds and the creak of the branches as the wind souged through the canopy. The natural beauty of the land around her—Leah's new home—was breathtaking.

Leah thought about what happened the night before—her wedding night. While she had to admit that her wedding wasn't what she had pictured it would be when she was a child, it wasn't without its sweet moments and memories she would carry with her for the rest of her life.

Edgar had been a perfect gentleman. He'd been so sweet and doting that the mere thought of it brought a flush of warmth to her face.

That smile soon faded, though, when she recalled what had come after. Namely, Edgar's father. Never had she met such an angry and resentful man.

That he could behave the way he did—on his own son's wedding night, no less—was unconscionable. And it showed Leah just what sort of man Amon was.

She pitied Edgar for having to grow up with a man like that looming over him. And she couldn't, for the life of her, understand how Edgar had turned out so well when that was his only role model.

For her part, unconventional and unexpected or not, it was her wedding. And that belligerent buffoon Amon had ruined it all.

She'd tried to find forgiveness in her heart for him. In fact, she'd spent most of the largely sleepless night tossing and turning, trying to convince herself to let go of her anger at the man.

Leah had told herself over and over that it was not worth holding onto. That he was not worth it.

But she had woken up every bit as angry as she'd been when she had gone to bed. Leah wasn't normally the type who held a grudge. She was usually able to let things go pretty easily.

Staying mad about something or at somebody was just a waste of energy, as far as she was concerned. There were better things in life to spend that energy on.

But what Amon had done last night, for reasons she didn't fully understand, she couldn't let go.

She would have to find some way to put it aside—after all, she was living in the same ranch house as that man. Holding onto that anger would only make their living situation all the more awkward and unbearable.

Plus, he was Edgar's father and despite all of Amon's obvious flaws, Edgar still held some level of respect and affection for the man.

Leah recognized that her parents had been deeply flawed people as well, but she still loved them, so she understood. To a point.

And the last thing Leah wanted was to create tension between Edgar and his father. Or, at least, more tension than already existed.

As the golden orb slowly crawled over the horizon, the roosters began to crow, announcing the start of a new day. Edgar had told her they usually got an early start on the day, so it was important to Leah that she was up before them so she could make some breakfast before everyone started the day's chores.

Leah hustled back into the house, went into the kitchen, and started to look around. She found the loaf of bread and a dish of butter on the counter then went into the cold room and grabbed a jar of jam. On her way out, she spotted a bowl of apples, so she grabbed a couple of those, as well.

Once she had everything, she took out plates for everybody and set out two pieces of bread that she then buttered and spread jam upon. She smiled as she cut up the apples and included a couple of slices on each plate.

She carried the plates over to the table in the dining room and laid them out, then fetched some napkins from the cupboard and laid those out, too. She'd only just set down the last one when Amon stepped into the room.

Leah's heart dropped into the pit of her stomach and she felt an involuntary trembling in her body. He stared at her with his cold, cruel eyes and it was all she could do to keep from turning and fleeing the room.

But Leah stood firm. She looked him in the eye and although her legs were shaking so badly she thought they might give out beneath her entirely, she held her ground—and even raised her chin a little to show her defiance and strength.

He looked at her in silence for a moment, a cruel grin curling the corner of his mouth upward before his eyes flicked down to the

plate on the table in front of him. “What’s that?” he grunted.

“Breakfast, sir. I thought we could all start the day with some breakfast before we all got to work—”

“You call that breakfast?” he growled, interrupting her.

“Listen, Mr. Thompson, I know it must have come as a great shock to you that Edgar and I married—”

“What kind of breakfast is made up of bread and apples?” he muttered to himself as if he weren’t hearing her at all.

She let out a sigh and started again. “Mr. Thompson, I know we started off on the wrong foot but—”

“Who in the hell eats jammed bread and apples for breakfast?”

He continued speaking as if she weren’t there, insulting her as if she couldn’t hear him, and it was really infuriating her. She had never dealt with somebody so rude before.

But she swallowed down her anger, remembering that it would only make things more difficult for Evangeline. And more than anything, she wanted her little sister to have a normal and happy life.

She didn’t want Evangeline to grow up in a household filled with tension and strife, didn’t want her to have to worry about saying the wrong thing for fear of upsetting somebody.

But with Edgar’s father seemingly determined to do everything in his power to make things difficult for Leah, she feared the peaceful, normal life she desired for Evangeline was not to be.

Not unless Edgar took a firm stand against his father. And she didn't want to be the cause of that.

But at the same time, she was his wife and Leah wanted to believe that he would take up for her without her having to ask.

The dynamics in the household were going to be very complicated and Leah would be walking on eggshells for a while.

She held onto the hope that once things calmed down, Amon would stop being so nasty. Once they settled in, perhaps he would get to know them and maybe, in time, would come to like them.

Given how the first day with him had gone, she wasn't holding her breath, but Leah still allowed those small embers of hope to smolder inside of her. She wanted to get along with her father-in-law.

She didn't want there to be this sense of hostility between them. So, Leah silently vowed to swallow down her anger and hope that, eventually, he would come around.

"Mr. Thompson—"

"You can't work a full day on nothin' but bread and apples, girl," he said, his voice ice-cold. "This is why you don't belong here. You don't got no common sense."

Leah's eyes burned and her vision shimmered as tears welled in her eyes. Amon grunted under his breath and stormed out of the house, slamming the door behind him.

Leah's legs finally gave out and she had to quickly sit down at the table, otherwise she would have taken a spill. She buried her face

in her hands and began to sob.

But then Edgar was beside her. He gently pulled her hands away from her face and looked her in the eye, an expression of pure compassion on his face.

“What happened?” he asked. “Are you all right?”

Leah wiped away her tears and looked down at the table, trying to collect herself. She didn’t want Edgar to think she was such an emotional wreck all the time.

Amon had simply caught her off-guard and she’d reacted poorly. In the grand scheme of things, it wasn’t a big deal. She would get past it. It was fine.

“I’m fine,” she said quietly. “Thank you for asking.”

Edgar looked at her closely. “What did Amon do?”

She shook her head. “It’s fine.”

He looked around the table and his expression softened as he seemed to understand what had happened. Leah felt her stomach lurch and she had to bite back a fresh wave of tears as she shook her head.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know,” she said. “It’s just that this is what Evangeline and I had for breakfast most days. Minus the apples. We just made do with what we had. I didn’t think—”

“It’s not your fault,” he said. “And I’ll have a word with my father.”

“Please don’t,” she pleaded. “I don’t want things to be any more tense than they already are. Especially between you two. I mean, he’s your father.”

“That’s right. He is,” Edgar said through gritted teeth. “Which means he should have a little respect for my wife. Especially when she was trying to do something nice.”

“What’s for breakfast?”

They both turned to see Evangeline step into the dining room, her hair askew, rubbing the sleep from her eyes. Her gaze fell upon Leah and she frowned. Evangeline was too observant, sometimes.

Leah put on a smile and tried to look like she hadn’t just been crying. “Mornin’, Evie,” she said brightly. “How’d you sleep?”

“Is everything all right?” she asked. “Are you all right?”

Leah nodded enthusiastically. “I’m just fine, honey. Now, how about some breakfast?”

Evangeline gave her a smile, but it was hesitant, and Leah knew she hadn’t covered her tears well enough. Edgar patted Leah on the arm and offered Evangeline a warmer smile.

“How about some eggs, little duck? Maybe some bacon, too?” Edgar asked. “I think it’d go just fine with the bread and jam.”

Evangeline’s face scrunched up. “Little duck?”

Edgar nodded. “You have such a fondness for them ducks out on the pond, I think you’re probably part duck yourself. A little bit, anyway,” he said. “So, you’re goin’ to be little duck to me from

now on.”

Evangeline giggled wildly and seemed to enjoy the new nickname. A smile crossed Leah’s face—a genuine one this time.

She really enjoyed watching Edgar interact with her little sister and could see he was trying his hardest to be a father figure to her. It was something Leah was profoundly grateful for.

Where some men would shun children who weren’t theirs, Edgar was embracing Evangeline, and it made Leah’s heart swell.

“Well, let me go and make some eggs and bacon,” Leah said as she got to her feet.

Edgar started to rise. “No, I can do it. I’d like to,” she said. “You and Evangeline can talk about your mutual love of ducks.”

They both laughed, the sound filling Leah with a sense of joy she hadn’t known in a very long time. She headed toward the kitchen, then turned around.

“Should I make your father a plate?” she asked.

Edgar gave her a rueful smile. “Part of me says let him go hungry,” he said. “But yeah, maybe you should.”

Leah gave him a smile. “You’re a good man, Edgar Thompson.”

He looked at her with a fondness in his eyes that made her heart quiver. “I don’t know about that, but I’m definitely a lucky man.”

Her cheeks flushed with heat and, feeling as if she were walking on clouds, Leah went into the kitchen and set about making a proper

breakfast for everybody.

Leah screamed as the pain lanced up her arm. Her eyes wide with fear, she scrambled backward, nearly tripping over her own feet.

She barely made it to the door before going through and slamming it behind her.

The chicken that had been chasing her clucked and flexed its wings threateningly. Looking at the bird, Leah had to stifle the desire to go kick it.

To her right, Cecilia covered her mouth with her hand but not before Leah saw the smile. The older woman was hiding her laughter. Or at least she was trying to.

The sound of her snorting, muffled though it was, escaped her and Leah felt her cheeks flare with heat. She couldn't believe she'd been bested by a chicken—and then run out of the coop, just to add insult to her indignity.

"It's not that funny," Leah said.

"I'm sorry, Miss Leah," Cecilia replied, not sounding the least bit sorry at all.

Leah frowned but Cecilia still seemed amused. Her grin slowly faded, though, as she saw that Leah was taking it very seriously.

"You put too much pressure on yourself," Cecilia said in her thick accent.

“Because I want to show everybody that I can work and learn what it takes to run a ranch properly,” she said. “I want to show that I have value to this ranch and can pull my own weight.”

“You mean, you want to show Mr. Amon that you can do this work.”

Leah growled to herself. It was her first day working on the ranch, and she was desperate to prove her worth. She never wanted Edgar to think he’d taken somebody on who wouldn’t pitch in and do their fair share of the work.

More than that, she wanted to impress him. Leah wanted him to think that she was capable and good to have around—that she was somebody who could be counted on.

But equal to all of that was Leah’s desire to prove Amon wrong. To prove that she did belong out there and that she wasn’t a fool.

She wanted to show that angry old man that she could work just as hard as he could and provide just as much value to the ranch. It shamed her to admit, if only to herself, that this desire was as big of a motivation for learning her responsibilities on the ranch as impressing her husband.

Keeping her eyes fixed on the ground, Leah felt her cheeks flush with warmth. She’d been found out and hadn’t kept her motivations as close to the vest as she’d thought she had.

But then, she was finding that Cecilia was incredibly observant, and even more perceptive than that. She seemed able to see through anybody and get to the heart of their motivations without even trying.

That was a skill Leah wouldn't have minded having. But she suspected it was something a person was either born with or not.

"I suppose that might be part of it, yes," she admitted shyly.

Cecilia waved her off. "Do not pay that angry old man any more mind than necessary," she said. "He's angry at everything. It's no you. He's just taking his anger out on you."

Leah shook her head. "Why is he so angry?"

"He lost his wife many years ago. The love of his life," she said. "And he's been angry ever since. He's tried to discourage Edgar from finding love because he thinks love only ends in hurt."

"I say that's *mierda*. And I'm glad Mr. Edgar decided to not listen to him and follow his heart because now we have you and Evangeline here."

She grinned. "There's more life on the ranch than has been here in a long time, Miss Leah."

A gentle smile flickered across Leah's lips at her words. It was a kind thing to say, and she appreciated it.

But there was a part of Leah that was desperate to hear those words—or words similar to those—from Amon himself. She didn't know why it was so vital to her.

She shouldn't have to prove her worth to him. And yet, she felt compelled to do just that all the same.

"All right. Let's try this again, Miss Leah," she said. "You just need to go in there and be firm. Don't be scared of them. If they sense

you're scared, they'll peck you."

Leah looked at her hand, noticing all the red marks from the various beaks that had taken a hack at her. Thankfully, none of them had broken the skin, but it hurt just the same.

"Deep breath, Miss Leah," she said. "Be confident. Assertive. Take the eggs like they belong to you and don't be afraid."

Leah steeled herself and recalled the way Cecilia had entered the coop, bold and confident, and tried to emulate that. She strode into the coop and approached the nests.

Doing her best to project strength rather than fear, she reached into the first nest and plucked out a pair of eggs—without getting pecked. Even the chicken that had chased her out earlier was ignoring her.

Elated, a smile crossed her face and Leah continued down the line, drawing the eggs out of the nests. She was amazed by how simple it was and felt foolish for having had such trouble with it.

When she reached into the last nest, she felt a stabbing sensation in the middle of the back of her hand. Leah screamed in pain and withdrew her hand to find a thin rivulet of blood spilling down her skin.

She almost dropped the basket of eggs but managed to hang on to them as she backed away from the nests, her hand trembling.

And as she looked around, as if by some unspoken cue—perhaps they smelled the sudden fear on her—the chickens rounded on her as one. And in a hail of loud clucking, they advanced on her.

Leah gave a shout of surprise and quickly darted across the coop and out the door, slamming it behind her as a wave of feathered beasts crashed against it, clucking and cackling like mad.

“You said they wouldn’t attack me if I was assertive,” she complained.

“Oh no, I never said that. I just said they’d peck if they sensed fear.”

“But I wasn’t showing fear. I was picking the eggs just fine until that last nest.”

Cecilia cackled like one of the hens. “Oh yes, sometimes they peck you just because.”

Leah glowered at the chickens while Cecilia pulled a clean cloth out of her pocket and cleaned off the wound. Despite the amount of blood, it was a small scratch, which surprised Leah.

Cecilia gave her a soft, almost motherly smile. “You’ll learn that small cuts tend to bleed the most,” she said. “Now come, let’s put those eggs away.”

After putting the eggs into the cold room, Cecilia led her around the ranch and explained how to do the chores she’d be in charge of. Leah soaked it all in, enjoying the lessons Cecilia was teaching her.

Leah had always loved learning. It was something she didn’t get to do enough of—there was only so much one could learn in a factory.

But she relished every moment of the day she spent shadowing

Cecilia around the ranch, learning all the various tasks she would be doing.

Leah had never been afraid of putting in an honest day's work and frankly, being out in the fresh Colorado air as opposed to the cramped, stuffy, and overpoweringly hot factory, it might even be pleasant.

For the last task of the day, Cecilia handed Leah a bucket full of what looked to her like garbage—apple cores, corn cobs, chunks of meat, and other pieces of food waste.

“You go in there and pour the bucket into the trough,” Cecilia directed. “Is very easy.”

Leah opened the gate, stepped inside the pen, and walked toward the trough. Cecilia's voice stopped her, though, and she turned around.

“Always make sure you close the gates behind you,” Cecilia admonished her. “All the gates you go through outside, be careful to close them right away. That's somethin' you can't forget.”

Leah nodded. “I'll remember.”

She turned back to the pen and watched as a dozen pigs—some of them massive, probably doubling or even tripling her body weight—came shuffling toward her, snorting and grunting.

At first, she was terrified; the animals were bigger than anything she'd ever seen. But when they looked up at her with their big eyes, Leah found herself charmed by them.

She smiled and laughed as they jockeyed for position, getting

closer to her—no doubt because she had the slop bucket. She turned and dumped the whole bucket into the trough.

The pigs squealed and grunted and used their big bodies to push and nudge their way to the front of the line. Leah laughed and watched them for a moment, transfixed by the sight of these mammoth animals.

In Boston, she hadn't been around farm animals before, so this was a brand-new sight to her. It was just one more thing that was making her fall in love with Colorado.

But when she saw Amon in the distance, pushing a cart through the yard, Leah frowned.

There were a hundred different things she'd come to love about her new home. But the one thing she despised was threatening to overshadow them all.

Cecilia pulled the pan out of the oven and set it down on the counter to cool. Leah leaned over and inhaled deeply, savoring the rich, buttery, and yeasty aroma.

Underneath it all was a hit of sweetness and cinnamon that made her smile. “That smells wonderful,” she said. “I’ve never smelled bread quite like this before.”

“Well, that was all your doin’, Miss Leah.”

She shook her head. “No, you’re the one who taught me how to make this.”

“But you did all the work. And you did it perfectly. Mr. Edgar is goin’ to love it.”

Leah smiled wide, feeling a flush of pride as she looked at the cooling loaf of bread. Over the past couple of weeks, Leah had gotten into the rhythm and routine of life on the ranch.

She was always up with the sun, making breakfast for everybody. Once that was done, she cleaned up, and by that time, Cecilia had arrived and they went through their daily chores together.

With the both of them working together, they got through it in half the time it normally took Cecilia—at least, it did once Leah got into the swing of things.

But that left them time in the afternoon to do things like bake bread and spend time preparing meals. Cecilia had mentioned that she used to bake bread for Edgar when he was younger and that it had been his favorite.

She hadn't made it for him in years, so she'd suggested that Leah try her hand at making it for him. Leah had readily agreed, excited to have the opportunity to do something special for Edgar.

It had taken her a couple of attempts, but this third try seemed to be the one. Looking at it, she couldn't keep the smile off her face.

"You did a wonderful job on it, Miss Leah. It's perfect," Cecilia assured her.

"Thank you. Without your guidance, I never would have been able to make this."

"Come, sit. It's time for some lunch."

Leah sat down at the table and Cecilia put a bowl down in front of her. Leah smiled and felt her stomach rumble as she looked down into the bowl of hearty stew.

A heady aroma wafted out of the bowl, and the rich blend of spices she was smelling made Leah's mouth water. She could tell this was a traditional and authentic Mexican dish—something she'd never had in Boston—and she looked up at Cecilia.

"What is this called?" she asked.

“It’s called pozole,” she said. “My mother taught me how to make this when I was a girl of about Evangeline’s age.”

“Where is my troublesome little sister?”

“Last I saw, she was down by the pond reading and talking to the ducks.”

Leah laughed. “Of course she is,” she said. “I’m going to need to save her a bowl of this. I have a feeling she’ll love it. She always was very adventurous when it came to new food.”

“Already set some aside for her,” Cecilia said with a grin.

“What would I do without you? You think of everything.”

Cecilia shrugged. “I do what I can, Miss Leah.”

“You do much more than that.”

Cecilia set some bread and butter down on the table then sat down across from her. They tucked into their pozole and the moment the rich broth hit her tongue, Leah let out a groan she knew sounded indecent, but she couldn’t help herself.

“I am in love with this dish,” Leah announced. “It is the most amazing thing I’ve ever tasted.”

“I am glad you like it,” Cecilia said, sounding pleased. “Perhaps I can teach you to make it.”

Leah nodded eagerly. “I would enjoy that a lot. Yes, please.”

She had never had the opportunity—or the luxury—of learning

how to cook full and proper meals. Certainly nothing as amazing as Cecilia's pozole.

She and Evangeline had always had to settle for whatever they could find in the cabinets or the cold room, which often wasn't much. The idea of learning to cook something as rich and delicious as the pozole she was eating, not to mention many other things, felt luxurious to her. Decadent.

It was how she'd always imagined the wealthier people in Boston living, and she was excited to experience that side of life—a life where deprivation and want weren't her constant companions.

"I think Mr. Edgar would like it if you learned to cook some of his favorite dishes," Cecilia said. "I think he'd like it very much."

"I would really enjoy learning to cook some of his favorite dishes for him," Leah agreed eagerly. "Maybe then I could even take some of the burden of cooking everything off you."

"Oh, is no burden. I enjoy it," she said. "My mother always said cooking was just another way to say, 'I love you.'"

Leah sat back in her chair and smiled as she let the words play through her mind. She gave Cecilia a warm smile.

"I like that. I like that a lot," she said. "It's charming. It's a lovely saying."

Cecilia smiled back, but there was a sadness behind it, as well, which made Leah think that she'd lost her mother. She didn't want to be rude enough to ask about it, though, nor did she want to bring up any unwanted emotions.

She knew well how thick the grief could be when you lost your loved ones, and just how long it could linger. Leah wouldn't wish that sort of pain on anybody.

Cecilia took a bite and wiped her mouth with her napkin. She sat up and looked at Leah closely long enough that she started to feel uncomfortable beneath the woman's scrutiny.

But then she favored Leah with a warm, motherly smile. "I am glad you and Mr. Edgar found each other," she said. "You look like two people who belong together."

Leah felt her face grow warm. "We're still getting to know each other, but I think he's a good man. He seems to have a good heart."

Cecilia nodded. "He is the kindest man I've ever known. He has a very good heart and cares about others.

"I've worked for the Thompsons for a long time now, since just after Miss Geraldine passed away, and I've watched Edgar grow into a good man. A great man.

"All he needed was a good woman by his side. And now he has you."

A gentle smile touched Leah's lips and she looked down into her bowl of pozole for a long moment as she tried to sort out everything she was thinking and feeling. Leah had to keep a tight rein on her emotions.

She couldn't let herself get too attached to Edgar just yet. This was all so new and felt so tenuous that she was afraid it would blow apart if she put too much emotional weight on it.

But it was difficult. There was something about Edgar that really connected with Leah. She was physically attracted to him, yes—he was a handsome man.

But more than that, there was something deeper that resonated with her. It was his personality, his heart, his mind—Leah found she was attracted to everything about him. Her soul somehow clicked with his.

And there was part of her that wanted to give herself over to him, that wanted to throw open the emotional walls she hid behind and invite him in.

She was learning to care for Edgar in ways she had feared she would never be able to. And while she couldn't call it love, Leah saw a path for them to eventually get to that point.

But they had only officially been married a couple of weeks now and though they seemed to be growing close, Leah still lived in fear that Edgar would change his mind—that he would realize he didn't care for her and saw no way forward together.

Worse still, she worried that horrible man Amon would change Edgar's mind or make him somehow sour on her and their marriage.

Leah knew that was Amon's goal—to make his son reconsider the idea of being married to her. To make him send her and Evangeline back to Boston.

Cecilia looked at her as if she could see Leah's thoughts and a small frown touched her lips. "Mr. Edgar is a strong man. He is his own man, and he will not let anybody, not even Mr. Amon, change his mind."

It felt nice to have her worries in the open. But she also feared being that transparent with anybody. Leah wasn't used to opening up to people and had learned long ago it was best to keep her own counsel.

Telling people too much gave them power over you and more often than not, they used that power in vicious and destructive ways.

"Do no worry, Miss Leah," she said. "Mr. Edgar already cares for you. I can see it in his eyes and he won't let anybody change his mind about that."

"I hope you're right, Cecilia. I really do."

The front door banged open and the sound of the heavy footsteps coming toward the kitchen filled Leah with a sense of impending doom. And when Amon stepped into the kitchen, her heart dropped into her stomach.

His face was lined with anger, his expression dark. He glared at her and she could see the muscles in his jaw clenching.

"You slop the pigs today?" he demanded.

Leah nodded. "Yes, sir. I did."

"You left the pen gate open," he growled.

Leah's breath caught in her throat and a growing sense of horror enveloped her. She cut a glance at Cecilia, who lowered her gaze to the table.

She had warned Leah multiple times about making sure the pen gate was closed behind her. Leah had been so excited to get into

the house and learn to bake the bread that she must have rushed out without double checking.

She could have sworn that she did, though. She racked her brain, trying to remember, but it was all a haze and she couldn't recall.

"I said you left the pen gate open," he said, his voice dripping with disdain.

"I—I'm sorry," Leah said softly. "I'm very sorry—"

"Your sorries ain't gonna round up them pigs that got out," he said. "And it ain't gonna make the pig that got itself hurt all better."

"One of them got hurt?" she asked, aghast by the thought.

"That's what I said, didn't I? You got a problem with your ears, too?" he snapped. "Pig took a spill. Cut itself up pretty good."

"Will it be all right?"

"No thanks to you."

"I'm sorry, Amon," she said. "I truly didn't mean—"

"Don't much matter what you meant," he said, his voice rising. "Only matters what you do."

"And what you did was screw up. Again. Like I knew you would, because you don't belong out here. You ain't got what it takes to work on a ranch—"

"Mr. Amon—"

“This don’t concern you, Cecilia, so I’d appreciate it if you stayed out of it,” he said, then turned back to Leah. “Worst part of what your stupidity cost us?”

“Crops we needed to survive out here. Crops we were countin’ on.”

She shook her head as her eyes welled with tears. She had no idea what he was talking about. But then, she didn’t really want to know simply because it was just another reason he had to demean and insult her.

Looking down at her hands, Leah did her best to keep the tears in her eyes from falling. It was a losing battle, though, and soon enough, the tears were spilling down her cheeks anyway.

“Yeah, the pigs you didn’t take care to secure got into the fields,” he said. “They done ate a bunch of the crops already.

“Good thing I got there when I did or they’d have eaten them all. And then what? We’d have nothin’.”

“I’m sorry,” she whispered through trembling lips. “I’m so sorry.”

“Sorry ain’t gonna bring them crops back,” he snapped. “I told you that you don’t belong out here, that you weren’t cut out to work on the ranch.

“I think it best if you just pack yourself up and get on back to your sewin’ circles in Boston. Far away from where your stupidity can do some real damage like you already done.”

As if noticing it for the first time, Amon looked at the loaf of bread she’d made for Edgar. He tore a large chunk off the loaf and walked out, gnawing on it as he muttered under his breath.

Shame and humiliation burned in her face and Leah couldn't stop the tears from falling as she looked at the remains of the torn and destroyed loaf of Edgar's bread.

Her sobs shook her entire body, and she just knew she couldn't be there anymore. She jumped to her feet and darted out of the kitchen.

Leah ran to her room, slamming the door behind her. She threw herself down on her bed, buried her face in her pillow, and sobbed her eyes out.

She knew she was behaving like an immature girl but at the moment, she didn't care. Amon's words had cut her deeply and she just needed to let herself bleed for a little while.

Edgar swung the hammer, driving the last of the nails into the wood, finishing the repair on the fence in the far southern field. The last storm that blew through had left it cracked and damaged, and Edgar had been meaning to get to it for a few weeks.

But things had been busy with Leah and Evangeline coming, the wedding—it had been a whirlwind. Today, he'd made sure to carve out the time to get it done.

The specter of his cattle getting out and wandering around the valley had been plaguing his mind.

Edgar smiled to himself as he thought about the girls, as he'd affectionately started to think of them. He and Leah had grown closer over the past few weeks and he definitely felt himself opening up to her in ways he hadn't expected.

But then, not having had much experience in matters of the heart, he really wasn't sure what he'd been expecting.

All he knew was that he found it incredibly easy to talk to Leah. She was clever and witty. She was smart—definitely smarter than he was by a long stretch. Leah never failed to make him laugh.

But she also made him think. Seeing the world through her eyes gave him an entirely different perspective about life, made him consider things in ways he never had before.

That was one of the things he appreciated the most about Leah—her ability to stimulate his mind. She was a beautiful woman, and he would have been lying if he'd said he wasn't physically attracted to her.

His body ached with desire whenever he thought about laying with her. But that was only one part of her appeal.

Maybe even the smallest part. It was her mind and the way she thought that enticed him and excited him the most.

Marrying Leah had been the best decision of his life because he could see a real future with her. It made him think of having a family of their own.

One day, they'd need somebody to take over the everyday running of the ranch, and having a couple of sons would certainly help that. Or, if that was not in the cards for them, if she were interested in it, maybe Evangeline would want to take over.

Edgar had come to like Evangeline very much. He hadn't been sure about it at first simply because he wasn't used to being around kids. But he and Evangeline seemed to have a natural affinity.

It surprised Edgar that he'd become so fond of her in such a short amount of time. She was precocious, funny, and Edgar thought of her as the little sister he'd never had.

She was a great kid and he enjoyed being around her a lot more than he'd expected to.

But, of course, it wasn't all sunshine and rainbows. Hanging over their heads was the dark cloud that was his father.

Amon wasn't about to let Edgar enjoy his time with Leah and her sister. He was going to continue to peck at them like an ill-tempered hen, bound and determined to get between them.

On some level, Edgar knew his father's terrible behavior and disrespect was his own misguided way of trying to protect him. Losing his wife had put a hole in his father's heart that had never been filled.

Amon had changed after that, developing the philosophy that love was nothing more than pain.

To love somebody so completely and then have them ripped away from you, the way his mother had been ripped away from his father, was a pain Edgar never wanted to experience. He hated that his father had to endure it.

But that pain shouldn't stop a person from living. Edgar believed, as his mother had, that the greatest sin in the world was in not going after what you wanted because of fear.

Denying yourself something you wanted, something you could cherish and something that would forever alter your life for the better, just because you were afraid of what might happen would be the pinnacle of idiocy, according to Edgar's mother.

She had always believed in pursuing those things one was passionate about. His mother was fearless in that way and she never let anything get in her way—least of all herself.

Frankly, Edgar thought, she would be appalled by the way his

father had collapsed in on himself after she passed. And he knew she would be both mortified and furious by Amon trying to force Edgar to live that way, as well.

She would be angry at Amon for withdrawing into himself, terrified of his own shadow, and for being so discouraging to Edgar about his marriage.

Like his mother, Edgar believed in love. He believed it could make you better as a person. He thought it had already started to make him better as a man.

And he wanted to be even better for Leah—as well as a better father figure to Evangeline. He believed love made those things possible.

He wasn't going to use the possibility of being hurt, the pain of loss, as an excuse to hide from love. He wasn't going to let fear deter him from something he thought could be great, something he thought could be special.

They had a long way to go yet before they could say they loved each other. But Edgar felt himself growing more attached to Leah by the day.

He already cared for her and knew the depth of that feeling would only grow with time. And he wasn't about to let his father get between them and ruin something good.

As he put his tools back into the box, a rustling in a nearby bush drew his attention. Startled, Edgar picked up his hammer and got to his feet, ready to take on whatever was coming at him.

But when a large pig burst from the bush and grunted at him,

Edgar laughed to himself. "Getting jumpy, old man," he muttered.

He stood there looking at the pig for a moment as it snuffled and sniffed at the ground. Edgar recognized it as one of his own.

"How'd you get all the way out here, huh?"

The pig grunted again in response, making him chuckle. Edgar had an apple he'd taken from the house before he'd set out to the fields and knew he could use it to help encourage the pig home.

He squatted down next to his box and pulled out a coil of rope, looping it around to form a lead and tied it off. Next, he pulled out the apple and held it out in front of the pig, which grunted and sniffed the air.

It apparently picked up the scent of the fruit and shuffled over to him. As the pig took the apple and started to chew, Edgar slipped the rope around its neck and pulled out the slack, giving him a leash for the animal.

His box in one hand and the leash of the pig in the other, Edgar made the walk home from the southern fields. It was a good twenty-minute walk through the heat of the day and by the time he got to the yard, he was slicked with a sheen of sweat.

He took off his hat and mopped his brow with the sleeve of his shirt, then closed the gate behind him and took the wayward pig over to the pen. He ushered it inside before he took off the lead and stepped out, closing the gate firmly behind him.

The pig mixed with some of the others in the pen then went over and fell onto his side in the dirt.

Edgar chuckled. "I can relate to you, pig. It's been a long day and I'd kind of like to do the same thing."

"That wife of yours set us back a piece today."

It was all Edgar could do to keep from rolling his eyes or otherwise lashing out in anger as his father approached the fence of the pigpen next to him.

"Her name is Leah, Pa," Edgar said for what had to be the thousandth time. "Try havin' a little respect."

"After all, I seem to remember you tryin' to raise me to be respectful. At least, you tried to until you crawled into that bottle and never came out."

Amon's expression darkened. His father didn't like to be reminded of how much he drank—whether it was because he was ashamed or because he thought his son didn't know, Edgar wasn't sure.

Amon was secretive about his drinking, usually doing it in his room when he wasn't sneaking a few nips out in the fields.

But Edgar always knew when his father was drinking—which was nearly round the clock. The flushed cheeks and glazed eyes were always a dead giveaway.

"She left the gate open. All them pigs got out. Took me nearly an hour to wrangle 'em all back into the pen," he growled.

"They tore up the crops too, son. They destroyed a lot of what we need to make it through the winter months. Gone, just like that."

Edgar sighed. It was a setback, to be sure. But there was nothing

they grew that couldn't be replaced by the mercantile or the grocer in town. And it was certainly nothing to be that outraged about.

"I told you she wasn't fit to be out here," his father said. "I told you she'd be causin' more problems than she's worth."

"She made a mistake," Edgar argued. "Mistakes happen.

"Or should I not mention the time you broke the fence in the western field when you were drunk and fell through it? I seem to recall it took us the better part of a week to round up all the cattle who got out."

His father's face grew tight, his expression hard. He was always happy enough to point out the faults and flaws in others, but when it came to acknowledging his own foibles, he didn't want to hear it.

More than that, he got angry if anyone dared bring it up. But Edgar was done with the hypocrisy and the disrespect.

Leah was his wife, and even though he knew she didn't want Edgar getting into it with his father over her, he wasn't about to turn a blind eye and a deaf ear to his father's constant belittling and badgering of her.

"You sure are quick to defend her over me," Amon snarled.

"Because you're bein' a horse's ass, Pa. You know as well as I do that mistakes happen," Edgar said. "Gates get left open. Fences fallen through. Crops can be replaced and regrown. It's not the end of the world."

"Lemme hear you say that when you're hungry this winter."

“Anything we need we can get in town,” Edgar countered. “You’re just lookin’ for reasons not to like her.”

“I don’t need reasons for that, boy. I just don’t like her,” he spat. “Don’t like what she’s doin’ to you.”

“And what is she doing to me?”

“She’s makin’ you soft,” he said. “And you know better than anybody you can’t be soft out here and expect to survive.”

Edgar chuckled to himself and shook his head. “First of all, I ain’t goin’ soft—not after only a few weeks,” he said. “Secondly, you expect her to be perfect—”

“I expect her to be competent.”

“And you expect me to be like you. But I’m here to tell you that I ain’t gonna be like you. I ain’t gonna be a miserable, broken down old man who nobody likes to be around.

“I’m choosin’ happiness and love,” Edgar said, his voice harder than steel. “Now, I’d love it if you managed to drop your attitude and be part of that.

“But if you don’t, then I think you should move into one of the bunkhouses I built. I’d rather you not be around Leah—and especially Evangeline—if you’re goin’ to poison them with your bitterness.”

“Just like that, huh? You’d run me out of my own house for a woman you barely know?”

“I will if you can’t show the proper respect.”

Amon looked at him for a long minute, his face growing redder, his expression turning darker. Edgar stood up straighter and squared his shoulders, returning his father's gaze with a burning intensity.

Amon finally looked away and just shook his head. "Fine," he said. "I'll move into one of the bunkhouse."

Edgar scoffed. "You'd rather move out than respect my wife?"

Amon nodded. "Yeah. I would."

And with that, Amon walked away, grumbling under his breath as he went. Edgar just watched him go, disbelief washing over him. But he resolved that he would not back down or cave to his father.

He'd drawn his line in the sand and he would not retreat from it. Leah was his wife. Yes, their marriage and courtship were unconventional. It wasn't traditional.

But that didn't mean it couldn't be a good thing for him. Edgar cared about her. And that his father couldn't see beyond his own pain to be happy for him told Edgar all he needed to know about the man.

Maybe one day he'd come out from under that black cloud of pain and anger and come around to a point where he could be happy for Edgar, where he could be respectful and kind to his wife.

Until that day, though, Edgar vowed that he would keep his distance and only interact with his father when absolutely necessary.

Edgar walked back to the house and looked around for Leah. He wanted to apologize for his father's behavior, but she was nowhere

to be found. Neither was Evangeline.

As he walked through the house, a thread of worry wrapped itself around his heart and pulled tight, sending waves of fear washing over him.

What if his father had managed to drive her off? What if he'd made Leah rethink being married to him?

Those and a thousand other thoughts and concerns raced through his mind. He didn't want to lose her. Not because of his father.

And if he did, he knew that for as long as he lived, he would never forgive Amon.

He walked into the kitchen and found Cecilia cooking something that smelled wonderful. He pushed his hunger aside and cleared his throat.

"Cecilia, have you seen Leah?"

"Si, Mr. Edgar," she replied. "She's in the garden with Evangeline. They're lovely girls."

He nodded and pursed his lips. "Are they all right?"

Cecilia frowned and looked away for a minute. But then she turned back, and he could see that she was upset.

"Mr. Amon—he said some very terrible things to them earlier," she said. "He was very cruel to them."

Edgar nodded. "Yeah, I know. He and I just had a talk about it."

“I feel bad for Miss Leah. She’s a good woman and doesn’t deserve what he said.”

Edgar sighed. It sounded even worse than what he’d feared. He thanked Cecilia then turned and walked out of the kitchen and headed into the garden to see what they were getting up to out there.

“G ood job, Evangeline,” she said. “We’ll make a farmer out of you yet.”

She giggled. “You need to make one of yourself, first.”

Leah laughed. “You are awful.”

“Sometimes,” she said with a shrug. “But you love me anyway.”

“And you’re lucky I do.”

They laughed together as they worked, until Leah heard the back door shut and the sound of somebody walking their way.

The bushes were too tall to see who was approaching but she felt a ripple of fear in her heart, expecting it to be Amon coming back for another round of insults and abuse.

She drew in a deep breath and steeled herself.

But it was Edgar who came around the bushes, and she let out a sigh of relief. He stopped a few feet away and looked down at her, curiosity on his face. Then, he looked over at Evangeline and

smiled.

With her hands coated in dirt and long streaks of it across her face, Evangeline looked adorable, and Leah couldn't help but smile, herself.

"Playing in the mud, little duck?" he asked.

"I'm becoming a farmer."

"Oh, is that so?"

She nodded, a flush of pride on her face. "We're planting crops and Leah says that makes me a farmer," she said.

Leah laughed. "I think it's a little more complicated than that."

Edgar chuckled. "And you're doing a terrific job of it, little duck," he said. "And I'd say you're a farmer through and through already."

"See?" Evangeline said to Leah, then stuck out her tongue at her.

"Yeah, well, you certainly smell like you've been working on a farm," Leah quipped.

"Hey!"

She and Evangeline shared a laugh as Edgar squatted down and looked Leah in the eye.

Leah felt herself shudder involuntarily. There was just something about the way he looked at Leah that made her heart swell and her stomach churn.

“Hey, little duck, why don’t you go get yourself cleaned up and presentable,” he said. “Cecilia is cooking something that smells amazing and by the time you get done peeling all that dirt off you, supper should be ready.”

“Good, I’m starved!” Evangeline cried as she got to her feet.

Leah watched her little sister skip off, leaving her alone with Edgar. An awkward tension filled the air between them, and she bit her bottom lip, trying to keep herself from blushing.

She wondered if she would always have these butterflies in her stomach whenever she was around him. Part of her hoped she would simply because it made things between them feel special. Different.

And she liked it.

“What are you two doing out here?” Edgar finally asked.

“I’m sure you heard about the incident with the pigs,” she said, not a question.

“My father mentioned it, yes.”

Of course, he had. Leah was certain that Amon had rushed right out to tell Edgar all about her latest failure.

He delighted in being able to prove that she didn’t belong on the ranch. That she couldn’t do the job. That she was incompetent and wrong for his son in a thousand different ways.

It infuriated her that Amon tried to use her inexperience on a ranch and the mistakes she made as a reason why Edgar should put

her on the next train back to Boston.

Most of all, she feared that one of these days, Edgar was going to listen to him. It was a thought that had caused her more than a little anxiety since she arrived.

Or, more specifically, since she'd started developing feelings for Edgar. The more attached to him she grew, the more scared she became about Amon's antics.

He was constantly trying to chip away at the foundation they were building, and Leah's fear was that eventually, the entire house would come crashing down around them.

Cecilia had said that Edgar was strong and that he was his own man. She believed that no matter what Amon said to him, Edgar would always make his own decisions.

Leah wanted to believe that, too, but there was a niggling worry in the back of her mind that whispered to her. It told her that one day, he would realize that she really did have nothing of value to offer—that she didn't belong on the ranch.

She didn't believe that about herself; she loved to learn and was willing to work hard. She was willing to put in twice as many hours as Amon, willing to do anything to make the ranch successful and to make Edgar successful.

She would do whatever was necessary to prove that she belonged there, by his side.

Leah stood up and dusted off her hands before she sat down on the stool she'd brought out. Edgar grabbed the stool that Evangeline had been using and set it down in front of her, then sat down

himself.

She gave him a small, awkward smile. “I feel awful about forgetting to close the pen,” she said.

“It was a mistake. Everybody makes mistakes,” he said. “It’s not nearly as catastrophic as my father is making it out to be, I promise you that.”

“Even still, the fact that my negligence cost us crops and other damages—I just want to make it right,” she said.

“It’s gettin’ late in the season,” he noted.

She nodded. “Cecilia has been teaching me all about the planting seasons,” she said.

“I know we’re too late for some of the crops we lost, but with a little luck, what we’re planting now will be ready in time for harvest. It’s not everything, but if it works out, we’ll be able to recoup much of what was damaged today.”

Edgar looked at the rows of seeds she and Evangeline had planted, appearing impressed with her efforts. His expression of surprise made her smile, but she was quick to cover it.

She didn’t have much right to smile when all she was doing was trying to correct her mistake. She had no way of knowing whether or not the crops she and Evangeline had spent the day planting would sprout in time for harvest.

All she could do was hope.

But at least she was doing something. At least she had

acknowledged her mistake and was trying to fix it. Not that Amon would ever give her credit for her effort.

But then, she wasn't really doing it for his approval, anyway. It would have been nice for him to acknowledge that she was trying, but she doubted he would. She was doing it for herself.

And maybe a little bit to gain Edgar's approval. It was important to her that he saw she was making the effort. That mattered to her.

"You look surprised," she said. "Did I do something wrong?"

He shook his head. "No, not at all. And I am surprised," he replied. "In a good way. I mean, you didn't have to do all of this."

She shrugged. "I felt like I did. I messed up today and I just wanted to try and make it right. I don't know if it's possible, but I wanted to try."

He reached out and took her hands in his, not caring that they were covered in filth. He gave them a reassuring squeeze.

"One thing I want you to learn is that you need to stop reacting to my father," he said. "You can't let him get under your skin because once he sees that he has, he's going to keep at you."

"He won't let up. He just wants a reaction."

"Why is he so disagreeable?" she asked. "And why does he hate me so much?"

A wry grin—almost a grimace, really—curled the corner of his mouth upward. "He doesn't actually hate you, Leah. I hope you can believe me when I say that," he said.

“What he hates is himself. If you strip everything else away, he hates himself. Has since my mother died.”

“It certainly seems like he hates me,” she noted with a rueful chuckle.

“He hates the idea of you more than anything,” he said.

“The idea of me?”

Edgar nodded. “To him, you represent everything he’ll never have again because he’s become such a miserable wretch—love and happiness,” he said.

“He also hates the idea that I may find those things in you. He’s threatened. He thinks you’re trying to take me away from him because what he really wanted more than anything was for me to spend the rest of my life as miserable and angry as him.”

“So, it sounds like his anger has nothing to do with me at all.”

Edgar shrugged. “When you get right down to the bottom of everything, it really doesn’t.”

“That hardly seems fair,” she pouted.

“It isn’t,” Edgar agreed. “But that’s where we are with him. He’s either going to come around or he won’t. And I for one am tired of walking on eggshells around him.

“I’m tired of always taking his feelings into account. I’m done with all of that, Leah.

“I’m determined to be happy. I’m determined that we’ll be happy,

and I'm not going to let him stand in the way of that any longer."

"So, what are we to do about it?" she asked, genuinely curious.

He shrugged. "We do nothing. I've told him that if he cannot treat you with the dignity and respect you deserve then he isn't welcome in the main house."

Leah looked at him, an expression of stunned disbelief on her face. "You really said that to him?"

A sad smile touched his lips and Leah could only imagine how difficult that had been for him. Regardless of what was happening, he still loved his father.

To her, that showed his character, showed her why Cecilia thought he was the best man she'd ever met.

"Yeah, I really told him that," he said, the tone of his voice matching the sadness in his eyes.

"What did he say?"

"He's moving out to one of the bunkhouses I built."

Leah frowned and she felt awful, as if this all were her fault. But then she recalled what he'd said about this not being about how Amon felt about her—it was about how he felt about himself.

And that made a lot of sense. Edgar clearly had plenty of wisdom and intelligence. To her, those were among his most attractive qualities.

She would have been lying if she said there wasn't a small part of

her that wasn't glad Amon was moving out to the bunkhouse. She felt horribly for feeling that way but that was just a reaction to how badly Amon had treated her.

"I'm sorry," she said softly. "I know this isn't easy for you."

He shrugged. "My father set this all in motion. There's nothin' for you to be sorry for," he said. "Like I told you, I'm done walking on eggshells around the man."

Leah looked out over the rows of crops she and Evangeline had spent so much time planting. Everything Edgar said made her heart swell until it felt three sizes too big for her chest.

He had shown her that he cared about her, cared about her enough to draw a line in the sand where his father was concerned. And while she felt bad for the toll it was taking on him, it also made her feel so happy she was speechless.

She finally managed to get herself under control and turned to Edgar. He offered her a warm smile and squeezed her hand reassuringly.

"Everything's gonna be all right, Leah. I promise you that," he said. "Everything's gonna be all right."

"I believe you," she said. "But there's one thing I want."

"What's that?"

"I want you to teach me everything," she said. "I want to know how to do everything around here."

He pursed his lips. "Are you still trying to impress my father?"

She shook her head. “No, I want to prove to you that I add value to the ranch,” she replied. “And I want to prove to myself that I add value.”

“You don’t have to do that, Leah.”

“Maybe I don’t have to. But I want to,” she told him. “I want to know how to do the work around here for myself more than anything.”

He paused and seemed to be thinking it over for a moment before he nodded. “All right. I’ll teach you everything I know.”

“Thank you, Edgar.”

He smiled. “We’re partners in this, right?”

Leah returned his smile. Partners. She liked the sound of that. She liked it a lot.

“Partners,” she said. “Yes, we’re partners.”

Edgar awoke to the scent of something delicious saturating the air. He sat up and scrubbed his face, then ran his hands through his hair. Edgar breathed deeply, savoring the aroma, and smiled.

It reminded him of being a kid when his mother used to cook fancy breakfasts for the family. A host of fond memories flooded his mind, making his smile wider.

He slipped out of bed and walked over to the wash basin. He splashed some water on his face and gave it a good scrub, then ran his wet hands through his hair, smoothing it all down.

After that, he got dressed in a pair of breeches and a plain button-down shirt. He slid his suspenders up over his shoulders, then pulled on a pair of his work boots.

Edgar checked himself in the looking glass before opening his bedroom door.

As he walked down the hallway, the fragrant aroma of whatever was being cooked grew stronger and made his belly rumble. He passed the dining room table on his way into the kitchen and

noticed that it had been set very nicely.

And when he stepped into the kitchen, he watched for a moment as Leah and Evangeline bustled back and forth, cooking up a storm.

Evangeline caught sight of him and smiled. “Good morning, Edgar.”

She had a smear of flour on her forehead and the tip of her nose, making him laugh.

“Good morning, little duck,” he said. “So, do you always end up with whatever you’re working on all over your face?”

She screwed up her face and stuck her tongue out at him. “Very funny,” she said. “You should be thankful. We’re making a wonderful breakfast for you.”

“Evangeline,” Leah admonished her. “Be nice.”

Edgar chuckled. “It’s okay. I deserved it,” he said. “But it does smell wonderful in here. Amazing, actually. What’s the occasion?”

Leah gave him a smile. “Bacon, eggs, and pancakes,” she said. “Evangeline made up the pancake batter all on her own.”

“Wow,” Edgar said, sounding impressed. “That sounds amazing.”

“It will be,” Leah proclaimed. “As for the occasion, does there need to be an occasion to have a family breakfast? We need a stick-to-our-ribs kind of meal before we get to work—as I learned.”

“I suppose not,” he replied. “Thank you for going to all this effort.

It means a lot.”

“Of course,” Leah said.

“It was Leah’s idea,” Evangeline said. “If not for her, I’d still be sleeping.”

Edgar laughed as he took a seat at the table. The girls brought out plates heaped with food and set them down.

He noticed, though, that Leah had a separate plate that she had filled with a mound of food and set it aside on the counter near the stove, then joined them at the table.

He was curious about it until he heard the front door open, followed by the sound of his father’s heavy footsteps. Amon entered the kitchen and looked around.

He spotted the plate Leah had set aside and snatched it up, then walked out again without saying a single word to them.

The sheer rudeness of his father angered him, and Edgar moved to stand up to tell his father exactly what he thought of his behavior. Leah laid a gentle hand on his arm and gave him a small shake of the head.

That she could show such grace and dignity in the face of such rude disrespect was impressive. He gave her a small smile and sat back down. If she could show such class, he could, too.

But it still burned his backside, and he would say something to his father about it later. Edgar was not going to tolerate that sort of behavior—especially not when Leah and Evangeline had gone to such obvious effort.

They dished out the food and started to eat. The conversation between the three of them was light and free-flowing, punctuated with a lot of laughter.

Edgar found that he was having a lot more fun than he had in quite some time. They were both clever and funny and they had him in stitches the whole time.

What really struck Edgar the most was just how domestic it all was. They were acting like a family, sitting around the table sharing a meal.

It had been a very long time since the atmosphere around the table had been so light and fun. The last time Edgar could remember there being so much laughter was back when his mother was still alive.

“So, what are you going to do today, little duck?” he asked.

“Well, I’m going to feed the leftover pancakes to the ducks in the pond,” she said.

“Of course you are,” Edgar replied with a grin.

“And then I think I might go to the orchard and read a book,” she said. “I enjoy reading quite a lot.”

“Well, we’ll have to make sure we do our best to keep you from running out of books then, won’t we?”

“I think that’s a good idea,” Evangeline replied.

“What do we say?” Leah asked.

“Thank you. I would enjoy that,” Evangeline said, drawing a smile from Leah.

“Then we’ll talk to Mr. Johnson—he owns the mercantile in town. He’s the one who will order new books. I’ll make sure he knows to have some sent in every month.”

Evangeline smiled. “Thank you.”

“You’re quite welcome,” he said.

He was reluctant to end their breakfast together—Edgar thought he could sit there all day, talking to them—but there was work to be done. Leah turned to Evangeline.

“Honey, would you mind cleaning up the kitchen?” she asked. “Edgar and I need to get to work outside.”

“Of course,” she chirped. “And after that, you will be able to find me in the orchard or next to the duck pond.”

“We’ll look for you there if we need you,” Leah said.

“Have a good day, little duck. And again, thank you for breakfast.”

“You’re welcome,” she said, beaming.

Edgar led Leah out to the yard. He could see she was curious and excited to get started on the day. They walked over to the barn and paused to let Amon walk his horse by.

He didn’t look at them or acknowledge them in any way whatsoever. Edgar’s body grew taut as anger simmered beneath his skin. But Leah again laid a gentle hand on his arm and his blood

instantly cooled.

She had the strangest effect on him. She could calm him down with nothing more than a glance or the lightest of touches. Nobody had ever been able to do that before.

Edgar didn't understand it, but he wasn't going to fight it, either. He thought it was just another part of his growth as a man with her by his side.

With his father gone, Edgar led her into the barn and down to a stall. He turned to Leah and gave her a smile.

"We're going to start by showing you how to ride," Edgar said. "If you're going to be taking on more responsibility around the ranch, you'll want to be comfortable on the back of a horse. Some of the fields are a way out there."

"Really?" she replied, sounding excited.

"Really," he said, a smile creeping across his face.

"I've always wanted to learn how to ride a horse," she said. "I've always had this dream of riding fast through a large open field, feeling the wind in my hair and on my face."

Edgar smiled. "It's a good feeling, that's for sure."

"Can we do that? Please?"

His laughter echoed around the cavernous barn. "Let's get you comfortable on the back of a horse first, huh? We have to learn to crawl before we can run."

She sighed dramatically. “Fine,” she said. “But I warn you now, I’m a quick learner.”

“I have no doubts,” he replied with a chuckle. “But we’ll start with teaching you how to saddle your horse.”

Edgar took her to the tack room to show her where everything was and get her acquainted with the various things she’d need to properly saddle a horse.

He made a mental note to go down to the mercantile and order a woman’s saddle for her. A man’s saddle was just too big.

After showing her how to do it a couple of times, he set the saddle on the ground and gestured to it. “Your turn,” he said.

Edgar stepped back and watched her struggle almost immediately. The saddle was too heavy for her and he stepped forward, but she shot him a death glare, warning him to stay back.

She was fiercely independent and determined to lug that giant saddle on her own. He admired her gumption.

It took her a couple of minutes of grunting and though he wanted to help, eventually, she was able to wrestle her saddle onto the horse and then quickly secured it.

Edgar gave it a look over and nodded to himself. “You really are a quick learner,” he said.

“I told you so.”

He chuckled. “All right. Now comes the difficult part—mounting up.”

Edgar showed her how to swing herself up into the saddle in one swift motion. He sat in his saddle and looked at her. Leah walked over to her horse and tried to do exactly what she'd just watched Edgar do.

But she slipped and fell out of the saddle, ending up on her backside with a less-than-ladylike grunt. Edgar stifled a laugh and just shook his head.

She turned to give him a glare that would have curdled milk.

"Try again," he said.

It took her another three tries, but she was finally able to get her foot into the stirrup and use her momentum to swing into the saddle.

Leah nodded to herself and Edgar couldn't help but notice the little light of pride shining in her eyes. She dismounted again easily and dropped to the ground then looked up at him.

Edgar smiled at her. "Graceful," he said. "Well done. But can you get back up into your saddle?"

And she did. In one graceful move, she was back up in her saddle again, sitting tall and looking at him with a wide grin on her face.

It was as if doing it the one time had allowed her to unlock the trick and she was now able to do it at will.

Edgar gave her a round of applause and a nod of approval. "Excellent, Leah. Very well done."

If she smiled any wider, Edgar thought her face might split. She

watched him closely, studying the way he sat his saddle so comfortably then mimicked his posture and gestures.

She held her reins loosely in one hand—the way he did—and held onto the saddle horn with the other.

“Are you ready to ride?” he asked.

She nodded eagerly. “Very ready.”

“All right. For now, we’re going to stay in the yard until you get the feel of your mount. I want you to be able to get the feel for your mount as we go over some of the basics,” he said.

“And after that, we can take them out on a run?” she asked.

Edgar hesitated then smiled. “Let’s just see about getting some of the basics down first.”

“Don’t forget how quickly I learn.”

Edgar chuckled and nodded. She was absolutely a fast learner. That much was true.

She had gotten the hang of sweeping into her saddle quickly, not to mention saddling her mount. She was a determined woman who seemingly didn’t let anything or anybody stand in her way.

She was fierce and never took no for an answer. He admired that about her a great deal.

Edgar took hold of her reins and he led her out into the yard, then handed them back to her. She gave him a smile.

“All right,” he said. “Time to learn some of the basics.”

“I’m ready.”

“Good girl,” he said.

They spent the next while practicing, running through the most rudimentary things again and again. He led her around the yard in a circle, teaching her to walk, to gallop, to stop, and turn her horse to the left and the right.

She caught on quickly and after just a couple of hours, he smiled at her. “Are you sure you’ve never ridden a horse before?” he asked.

“Positive.”

“I ask because of how comfortable and confident you seem sittin’ that saddle,” he said.

She smiled at the praise. “It’s like Cecilia taught me with the chickens—you just have to show them who’s in charge.”

Edgar laughed and nodded. “That’s true.”

“Now, can we ride?”

He smiled. “You’re good and you look comfortable. But I’m not sure if you’re ready for that—”

She had already started moving toward the open plains on the other side of the property line. Out there was nothing but dry scrubland, bushes, and gnarled, withered old trees.

It was good land for riding because there wasn’t much around, but

he worried about it all the same. If she got her mount going good, it only took her horse finding one small hole in the ground or taking a hard stumble for her to go flying and get herself hurt.

“You are as stubborn as your horse,” he said.

“She’s a good mount. I’ll take that as a compliment,” she replied.
“She and I have a rapport already.”

“I can see that.”

“Want to see something else?” she asked with a wicked little grin.

She didn’t wait for his answer. Leah spurred her mount and took off at a sprint over the open fields.

Edgar chuckled and shook his head as he watched Leah and her horse riding like the Devil himself were chasing her. She was determined and strong-willed, there was no question about that.

And as he spurred his own horse on to give chase to Leah, Edgar found himself laughing hysterically, appreciating that fiery personality of hers more and more.

The wind whipped Leah's hair behind her as her horse, Shallot, thundered over the open plain. She felt almost weightless, almost like she was flying, and she laughed out loud.

She knew Edgar probably thought she was crazy, but she didn't care. Leah couldn't remember the last time she'd had this much fun or felt as free as she did.

There was just something about being on Shallot's back, riding across the endless sea of grass with nothing but the shadow of the mountains in the distance that made her feel absolutely liberated.

"Slow down," Edgar yelled with a laugh. "You're going to get yourself killed."

"I can't," she shouted back. "This just feels too good!"

Edgar rode next to her, the smile on his face as wide as her own. She guided Shallot up a small hill and brought her to a stop beneath the wide, lush boughs of an oak tree Leah thought had to be at least a hundred years old.

Its trunk was wide and reached high into the sky, nearly scraping

the puffy clouds that drifted lazily by overhead. It stood alone atop this hill with little more than an endless sea of grass all around it.

That somehow made it even more beautiful to Leah, if a little desolate and lonely.

Or maybe it was the fact that it was a little desolate, that it stood alone and refused to give up and die amidst a sea of nothingness Leah found so striking. Perhaps she identified with the majestic old tree a bit.

Edgar sat atop his horse next to her, his eyes scanning the far horizon. His jaw was clenched, his expression tight. He looked concerned.

“What is it?” she asked.

Edgar looked over at her and his expression softened. He offered her a warm smile.

“Nothing. It’s just my habit to be aware of my surroundings,” he said. “There are a thousand things out here on the plains that can kill you if you’re not careful.”

“Truly?”

He nodded. “There’s plenty of snakes out here. I’m going to need to teach you about how to spot the poisonous ones,” he said.

“Not to mention the bandits and rogue groups of Indians who like to waylay people out here.”

“That sounds frightening.”

“Can be,” he agreed. “But if you’re smart and keep your eyes open and your wits about you, more times than not, you’ll come out of it just fine.”

Leah sat back in her saddle and surveyed the land around them, seeing it a bit differently with that knowledge in her head. But then, she knew any place had its share of dangers.

Boston may not have had Indians or snakes, but there were still plenty of dangers lurking in the shadows that were just as deadly. She’d avoided most of them and kept Evangeline safe by being vigilant and, as Edgar said, her wits about here.

While the scenery—and the dangers—were different, the same lessons she’d learned in Boston could be applied to Colorado.

As she sat atop Shallot, looking at the land around them, Leah couldn’t help but still feel a churning of excitement in her belly, despite Edgar’s dire warning. There were so many new things to see and new experiences to have that she couldn’t quell the feeling.

Leah had never ridden a horse before, and she was still buzzing from the rush of running wide open across the plains like she had.

She knew it was silly but riding Shallot like that and sitting there surveying the wild, untamed land around her made her feel like she belonged there. Like she was part of the land and the ranch.

And seeing the way Edgar was looking at her, with something like admiration and maybe even a healthy dose of affection in his eyes, made her feel like she belonged to him. Like she was... family.

All of that made her want to learn more. Made her want to do more. Leah wanted to learn to be every bit as competent on a horse

and around the ranch as Edgar.

If she could learn to do all that was required of a rancher, learned all the tricks of the trade, so to speak, Edgar would accept her. More than that, hopefully, Amon would.

She hoped if she made herself indispensable, a valuable contributor to the health and success of the ranch, Amon would come to see her as an asset rather than as an adversary.

Having been without her parents as long as she had been, Leah had to admit that she hungered for that sense of family. She wanted Evangeline to have that surrounding her as she grew up, as well.

She wanted her little sister to grow up encompassed by people that loved her. Treasured her. She wanted Evangeline to grow up steeped in love. Not fear, insecurity, and uncertainty.

That was why Leah so desperately needed to make this work.

“Do you think you can teach me to ride faster? Work a lasso?” she asked hopefully. “Do you think you can teach me how to jump a horse? What about—”

Edgar laughed and held a hand up to slow her down. Leah felt her cheeks flush and an awkward smile crossed her lips.

“Tell you what, why don’t we head on down to that little river down,” he said. “We can dip our toes in the water, enjoy a little sunshine, and talk about it. How’d that be?”

She gave him a shy smile. “I think that sounds lovely.”

Leah slipped off her boots and let her legs dangle over the edge of the bank and into the cool water.

She giggled as the current tickled her toes and the soles of her feet. It seemed crazy to her that something so simple could be so enjoyable.

Edgar sat next to her with his pants rolled up to the knee, his feet in the water and a gentle smile on his face. “Feels nice, don’t it?” he asked.

She nodded. “It does.”

Leah laid back onto the plush bed of grass beneath her, letting the sun’s rays rain down on her, warming her skin as the river water cooled her feet. Everything about the day had felt nice to her.

From the moment she’d spurred Shallot to a run across the open field, it all felt right and natural. It only strengthened Leah’s belief that she belonged out there with Edgar, that she and Evangeline could have a happy life in Colorado.

“My ma used to love this,” Edgar said. “She used to bring me out

to the river behind the house and let us just soak our feet for a while. She always said she thought the best things in life were simple and free.”

Leah laughed softly. “It sounds like your mother was a wise woman.”

Edgar nodded with a small, nostalgic smile on his face. “She was. She was a far sight smarter than me and my pa, that’s for sure,” he said.

“She told me it’s important to take a little time out of every day just for you. To enjoy your life and to never take things—not even the small things—for granted.”

A gentle smile curled her lips upward. “My mother used to tell me much the same.”

“Sounds like both of our mothers were wise women.”

They shared a laugh together and then, as naturally as breathing the air around them, they started to share stories of their childhoods, of growing up in their families.

Leah told him all about the debts her parents incurred, about working in the factory and trying to pay them down but never managing to get ahead.

She told him of the deprivations she and Evangeline had suffered and the difficult times they had endured. The nights of bone-numbing cold and the days of unrelenting hunger.

She told him everything she could think of, the good and the bad. And he’d listened without judgment in his eyes.

When she was finished speaking, Edgar nodded and pursed his lips, seeming to be lost in thought. Then he started to speak and told her all about his life growing up and the adventures he'd had.

He told her all about his mother—and his father. But Leah noticed there was a marked shift in his tone when he spoke about his life after his mother had passed away.

The early years of Edgar's life seemed to have been filled with love and joy. But after she'd passed and he was left alone with Amon, his tone became darker. Harder. There was less joy and more anger.

It was as if Edgar had lived two different lives.

Not that she could blame him for becoming that way. If she were forced to live with Amon all alone out there on the edge of the frontier, she might be just as angry and despondent.

Amon was just such a hostile and disagreeable man that his poor attitude rubbed off on people. Leah couldn't fault Edgar if he were a little rough around the edges.

But he had been nothing but kind and accommodating to her. He was clearly doing everything in his power to get out from under his father and be a different, better person than the example he'd grown up with.

And for that, she had all the respect in the world for him.

They spent a good part of the day on the bank of the river, sharing stories. Leah learned a lot about Edgar, and it only reinforced the belief that he was a good man with a good heart, just as Cecilia had told her.

“You remind me of her, you know. My mother,” he said suddenly.

She looked over at him and laughed softly at the strange comment. “I’m not exactly sure how to take that.”

“Oh,” he said, laughing at himself. “Sorry. I just meant the way I see you taking care of Evangeline.

“My mother looked after me the way you do with her. I think it’s sweet and it’s easy to see how much you love her.”

Leah smiled and felt the warmth inside of her spreading. “She’s my little sister. I want to be sure she has the best of everything. I want her to have a life she loves.”

He nodded, his smile wistful. “My mother said something very similar. And I love that about you, Leah.”

The air between them grew thick as their eyes met. It was charged with a sense of anticipation. Or maybe expectation.

It felt unreal, given they hadn’t actually known each other all that long, but Leah felt closer to Edgar than she had with anybody before. Granted, her experience with romance was limited.

But she knew herself well, and Leah found herself opening up to him in ways she never thought she’d open herself up to anybody.

Leah had told Edgar things she’d been sure she would take to her grave. But it felt so natural and right. She felt there was nothing she couldn’t tell him.

Even better, she felt like there was nothing about her he didn’t want to hear or learn. Edgar seemed genuinely interested in her as

a person. And that was something she hadn't expected.

Edgar's eyes gazed into hers and she felt almost weightless. Her heart thundered in her chest and her mouth grew dry.

And before she even realized she was moving, Leah leaned forward and pressed her lips to Edgar's.

He stiffened at first, clearly surprised by her boldness, but he soon warmed to her and pulled Leah closer to him, their kiss deepening, growing fiery and passionate.

Leah had heard of women swooning before, but as she shared a kiss with Edgar, it was the closest she'd ever come to experiencing it for herself.

As he helped Leah back up onto Shallot's back, Edgar couldn't take his eyes off her. His lips still tingled and his heart still raced from the thrill their first kiss had given him.

Edgar felt a heat spreading through his entire body as he thought about the feeling of her body, soft and yet firm, pressed to his. Leah had ignited a fire in him that was burning out of control.

But he knew he needed to find a way to tamp down the flames. There was a time and place for those kinds of thoughts, and this wasn't it.

They didn't speak for a little while as they rode in the direction of the ranch. But Edgar kept stealing glances at her and from the corner of his eye, he could see she was doing the same.

The air was awkward but thick with a mutual attraction, perhaps a mutual desire, that had been developing slowly between them. It seemed to him those seeds were beginning to bear fruit, and he so badly wanted to taste them.

But he would wait until Leah was ready. He would never do anything to put her in an uncomfortable position.

Just ahead, he could see the ranch house and the outbuildings. As they rode, their shadows grew longer as the sun dipped toward the horizon.

In the yard, Alberto and his father were moving about, and Edgar swallowed the knot that had risen in his throat. He knew his father would read him the riot act for spending all day at play, as he would call it, rather than working the fields like he should have been.

But as far as Edgar was concerned, ensuring his wife was happy and comfortable in her new home was every bit as important as his chores.

The truth was, the ranch wasn't doing well, overall. They had run into some financial problems along the way, and it was going to take some hard work—a lot of hard work—to turn things around.

Edgar couldn't even lie about it to himself—his father's drinking had played a significant role. There were plenty of times he'd caught his father sleeping one off out in the fields when he could have been working.

So, he wasn't about to feel guilty about spending one afternoon with his wife. God knew they needed some time alone together since they weren't able to take a honeymoon.

The timing of it all probably wasn't ideal. With them trying to get things back on track and the ranch profitable again, taking time out to get himself married probably wasn't the smartest thing to do.

But, after getting to know Leah a bit through their correspondence, Edgar had feared that if he didn't lay claim to her, he would lose

her.

She was looking for a husband and if he hadn't proposed, she easily could have moved on to somebody else. And even just through their letters, he'd sensed how special she was. How different.

There was a connection that existed between them even a thousand miles away from each other. He could feel it coming off the pages when they wrote.

But she couldn't wait forever and if he hadn't moved things forward with her, he might not have gotten another chance. And he had very much wanted to move things forward with her.

Even then, with the troubles the ranch was having, he didn't regret it. Being with Leah—and with Evangeline—made him happier than he'd been since his mother died.

The bond between them was only growing and strengthening, so how could he regret taking the chance he had, timing of it all be damned?

Edgar knew he and Leah had the chance to build something special between them. Something lasting. And he would have been a fool if he had not acted on it when he did.

"Teach me how to jump," she said.

Leah's voice pulled Edgar out of his mind and drew his attention. "Jump?"

She nodded enthusiastically. "Jump Shallot over a fence or something."

Edgar chuckled. It shouldn't have surprised him that she'd want to learn how to do something dangerous. Leah had a bit of a wild streak in her he thought she was only just learning to tap into.

Knowing she'd had to be so constrained her whole life and had never gotten to do those borderline crazy things made him want to indulge her, just to see her smile. Just to make her happy.

"All right," he said. "Pay close attention."

For the next half hour or so, Edgar showed her how to jump her horse. She took to the lessons quickly, as she had with everything he'd taught her.

She rode like a natural and he knew with a little more practice she'd be as good in the saddle as Edgar or his father.

He watched her for a few more minutes doing all the run-up work he'd shown her and decided she was ready to give it a shot. "All right, are you ready?" he called.

Leah nodded eagerly, a wide smile stretched across her lips. Edgar gave her a nod and she put Shallot in motion.

He watched her form as she approached the small half-fence he'd instructed her to use—it wasn't high and Shallot shouldn't have too much trouble clearing it, but it would give Leah a bit of a thrill.

She lowered herself in the saddle as Shallot picked up speed, preparing to roll with the horse's motion when she leapt—just as he'd taught her.

But when Shallot neared the fence, she inexplicably stopped short and Leah, who'd been expecting to rise with the horse's big body,

was sent flying instead. Edgar's heart dropped into his stomach as he watched Leah sail over the fence.

He couldn't see where she landed, but he heard a sickening crunch that twisted his stomach into knots. The sound was followed by the most profound silence he'd ever heard, and his heart felt as if it had stopped dead in his chest.

"Oh God. Oh no," he muttered.

Edgar fell to his knees beside her. Leah was silent and completely unmoving. He called her name several times and as tears blurred his vision, Edgar checked her over for wounds but didn't see any obvious ones.

Not until he'd gently cradled the back of her head to lift her. There, he'd felt blood, slick and viscous, on her scalp. Edgar looked down at her face, which was pale and drawn.

"Leah. Wake up, Leah. Please, wake up."

He leaned down, holding his ear just above her mouth, and let out a cry of relief when he heard her draw a breath. It was ragged and shallow, but it meant she was alive.

Taking care to avoid jostling her too hard, Edgar picked her up and cradled her in his arms. As swiftly and gently as he could, Edgar carried her back to the ranch house.

He burst through the door and Cecilia, seeing him coming, had already sprung into action. "In here, Mr. Edgar," she called.

Edgar followed Cecilia down the hallway and into Leah's room. He

gently laid her down on the bed and Cecilia looked at him and frowned when she saw the blood on the back of Leah's head.

Evangeline came running into the room, stopped at the foot of the bed, and looked at her sister in horror. Tears immediately sprang to the young girl's eyes and rolled down her rosy cheeks.

She looked to Edgar and his heart immediately went out to her. "What happened? Is she all right?" Evangeline cried.

Edgar moved to the girl and dropped to a knee before her. He took hold of her hands and gave them a gentle squeeze. "She's just had a little accident, little duck.

"She's going to be all right," he added quickly, hoping he sounded more reassuring than he felt. "I need you to go to Alberto. Find him, tell him to get Doc Parker out here right now."

Evangeline searched his eyes. "If she's going to be all right, why do you look and sound so scared?"

He'd forgotten just how perceptive and smart she was. But this wasn't the time for her precociousness to take over and lead her to asking a thousand questions.

He gripped her hands a little tighter, holding her gaze firmly. "Listen to me, little duck. I need you to do as I ask without a lot of questions right now," he said.

"I just need to get Doc Parker here as soon as possible. All right? I promise I'll explain everything to you when I have more information, but right now, I just need the doc here."

Evangeline nodded, seeming to steel herself. "All right."

And with that, she turned and fled. He listened to her footsteps pounding through the house. The door banged open then slammed shut, and he nodded then turned back to Cecilia.

“What can I do?” he asked.

“Get me some clean cloth,” she said. “And I have a pot of water on the stove warming already. Bring that, too.”

Edgar hopped to it, running through the house to get what she needed. When he returned, he poured the hot water into the wash basin and stopped back, watching as Cecilia tended to a still unconscious Leah.

“How did this happen?” she asked.

“She fell off her horse,” he replied.

He deliberately left out the part where he was trying to teach her to jump Shallot. It was a complication he didn’t need at the moment.

He helped Cecilia turn Leah onto her side and watched as she dipped the cloth into the wash basin and cleaned the wound, taking care to be gentle with her. When she’d managed to clear away most of the blood and other debris, Cecilia wound a strip of clean cloth around Leah’s head.

“What do you think?” he asked.

She shook her head. “I am no doctor—”

“You’re the next best thing.”

Cecilia sighed. “The wound is not so deep. It bleeds much, though. I think she will be all right, but is not for me to say,” she said. “Is for Dr. Parker to say.”

He nodded. Edgar knew Cecilia’s abilities were rudimentary at best, but she had tended to injuries he and his father suffered while working well enough.

He’d hoped this would be something simple she could bind, and that Leah would be fine. But, deep down, he knew.

His heart raced and his stomach churned knowing there was nothing he could do but wait and hope. And maybe pray, as well.

“I’m going to go wait for Doc Parker,” he said to Cecilia. “Call me in if she wakes up.”

Cecilia nodded. “I will.”

Edgar walked through the house and stepped out onto the front porch, watching the road for any sign of the doctor’s approach.

Worry twisted his guts into knots, and he had to fight off the waves of nausea that battered him. He silently cursed himself for being so stupid, for allowing her to do something so reckless.

And he silently cursed his father for pushing her to such lengths. If Leah hadn’t been so desperate to belong, she might not have been taking those risks.

She might not have been so eager to prove her worth, if not for Amon’s constant badgering and belittling.

“Damn you,” he muttered.

Amon was standing in the barn, brushing off his shirt, when he saw Alberto race the buckboard into the yard. He pulled to a quick stop and Amon watched as he and Doc Parker climbed out of the wagon and dashed up the stairs and into the house.

A flutter of worry passed through him. The frantic way they'd come charging into the yard and into the house told Amon that whatever was going on, it wasn't good.

He pulled his gloves off and stuck them in his pocket, headed for the house. His first thought, of course, was that something happened to Edgar. That thought worried him a lot.

He and his son might not see eye to eye on some things—or most anything, it seemed, these days—but at the end of the day, he loved Edgar. Amon knew he wasn't great about showing it.

Ever since Geraldine passed, he'd withdrawn and seemed to have lost the ability to express his emotions—not that he was ever all that great to begin with.

But after his beloved wife's death, he'd gotten even worse about it. And he knew it bothered Edgar because he took after his mother in

most every way.

Amon stormed into the house to find Edgar sitting on the sofa with his face buried in his hands. He felt an instant rush of relief wash through him knowing that his son was safe and unharmed.

The sound of voices deeper in the house drew his attention and he realized it was that woman who was injured. What idiotic thing could she have done to hurt herself?

He assumed it wasn't serious and all that fuss was probably just much ado about nothing.

He turned back to Edgar, who finally raised his head and looked at him. His son's eyes were red and puffy, his cheeks wet with tears. The sight of his son crying rattled Amon.

Though his son was better able to express his emotions than he was, Edgar usually kept them pretty well under control.

In fact, he hadn't seen Edgar cry since the day his mother died; not once in all the years between then and now. Seeing him in tears shook Amon to his core and he immediately thought the worst—at least, the worst as far as Edgar was concerned.

"What's happened?" Amon asked.

"Leah, she—she fell from her horse," Edgar replied softly.

"How bad?"

He shrugged. "I don't know yet. I'm waiting to hear what Doc Parker has to say."

Amon slipped his hands into the pockets of his breeches and frowned. He looked down the hallway toward her bedroom.

He couldn't see anything and the voices drifting down to him were muttered and indistinct, but the tone he heard in Doc Parker's voice made him think it was serious.

As terrible a thought as it was, Amon wondered if perhaps it was best for everybody involved if his wife didn't pull through. At least then Edgar would be able to move on from her without guilt or consequence.

It would be a painful experience, as Amon well knew, but it would pass, and she would cease to be a distraction for Edgar—or a wedge between Amon and his son.

"How'd she fall off her horse?" Amon asked.

Edgar sighed. "I was teaching her to jump her horse."

"You were what?"

"Teaching her to jump her horse. She wanted to learn—"

"What in the hell were you thinkin'?"

Edgar glared at him, his jaw clenched, his eyes narrowed. It wasn't hard for Amon to see the guilt that was gripping his son over the woman's injuries.

"You could've hurt that horse doin' somethin' as stupid as that," Amon griped.

"Shallot is fine."

“All I’m sayin’ is that we only have so many horses. And you know we can’t afford—”

“Can we do this later, Pa? There are more important things to worry about now than hollerin’ at me for somethin’ that didn’t happen. Like I said, Shallot is fine.”

“It ain’t just Shallot. That woman has been a disaster since she got here,” Amon said, his voice rising. “The pigs, the crops, the horse—everythin’ this woman touches goes wrong, son. She just ain’t—”

“You need to stop tellin’ me what she is and what she ain’t,” Edgar hissed. “You don’t even know her. You never even gave her a chance so you ain’t got no right to be talkin’ about her, let alone judgin’ her.”

Hearing the heat in Edgar’s voice, Amon bit back his next words. It was a fight they could have another day.

Of course, if everything else worked out the way Amon wanted it to, there wouldn’t be an argument to have since Edgar wouldn’t be doing stupid things like that.

The problem, as Amon saw it, was that woman.

“This is what I’ve been talkin’ about, son,” he said softly.

Edgar cocked his head and looked at him. “What do you mean by that?”

“I mean that woman,” he said. “Look at how twisted up in knots you are right now. And this, over a simple fall. How bad off are you gonna be if somethin’ serious happens to her?”

“Somethin’ serious did happen to her, Pa. She’s hurt bad,” he growled.

“This is why I keep tellin’ you that you never should’ve gotten involved with her in the first place, son,” Amon said. “This is what love does to ya. It spins you around and twists you all up.

“Goin’ down the road you’re goin’ down is only goin’ to end up in hurt. I mean real pain, Edgar. And I’m tryin’ to spare you all that.”

“I don’t want to end up like you,” Edgar growled, “miserable and alone.”

“You’ve always been like your mother with your notions of love,” he said. “Well, the reality is that the only thing love brings you is grief, son. I don’t want you to go through that.

“I mean, if you really give your heart to this woman and she dies because of her own stupidity, it will destroy you. Especially if you had a role in it—”

“Look, I don’t want to do this, Pa. Not now,” Edgar said as he shot to his feet.

“She’s my wife and if you don’t learn to start showin’ her—and me—some respect, we’re goin’ to have some real problems. You understand me?”

Without waiting for his answer, Edgar turned and stormed toward the front door. Amon’s blood boiled as he glared at his son’s retreating form.

Edgar had never been so blatantly disrespectful to him before. Not until he fell in with that woman. She was driving a wedge between

Amon and his son, and it was infuriating him.

“Send her back to Boston, son,” Amon called. “Save yourself the pain and heartache, because this is not going to go the way you imagine it will. It never does. Love is nothing but pain! Remember that!”

The door slamming behind Edgar was Amon’s only answer. He was left standing there alone, caught between his anger at his son for being so obstinate and the woman for coming between them.

“**N**one of your injuries are all that serious,” Doc Parker said. “You took a good fall, no question about that. Got your head cracked and you probably have a concussion.”

Leah groaned and held her hand to her head, wincing at the dull throb banging against her skull. Dr. Parker had given her a tonic to help with the pain, but it didn’t seem to be doing much.

Leah was having trouble breathing—it hurt to draw a deep breath.

Doc Parker was an older man with a head of thick, white hair with deep lines etched into a face that was golden from plenty of time in the sun. He was tall and thin, almost gangly.

The man had a dry sense of humor and an acerbic tongue, and Leah wasn’t terribly impressed with the man’s gruff bedside manner. But he could be kind at times and he clearly knew what he was doing.

“You’ve probably got some cracked ribs to go along with that bump on your head, Leah,” he added.

“I can tell,” she replied dryly.

“Only thing that’s gonna heal those is rest,” he said. “No hard physical labor. No exertin’ yourself. You want to stay off your feet as much as you can.”

Leah looked to the doorway and saw Edgar step into the room. He looked anxiously from her to the doctor and back again. As if picking up on his anxiety, Doc Parker turned to him and nodded.

“You can stop holdin’ your breath, son. She’s goin’ to be fine,” he said.

A look of relief washed over Edgar’s face, and he gave Leah a warm smile. “That’s good news. Thank you, Doc.”

“She needs to stay off her feet, though,” Parker cautioned. “I mean it. She needs rest until those ribs heal up.”

“Easier said than done,” Edgar muttered.

“You find a way to get it done,” Parker said gruffly then cast a firm glance at Leah. “If you don’t let those ribs heal up, they could break clean through.

“That happens, they could puncture a lung. Or worse. And if it does, she’s goin’ to be in a whole world of hurt, I promise you that. There might be no comin’ back from that.”

“I understand,” Edgar said and turned to Leah. “Do you understand?”

She gave him a wry smile. “Yes. I understand.”

“Good.”

Doc Parker handed Edgar a bottle of powder. “This is for the pain when it gets to be too much. Be sparin’ with it.”

“Thank you.”

Parker grunted and walked out of the room, leaving Leah alone with Edgar. He stepped to the side of the bed and looked down at her, his face still a mask of concern, but he gave her a tight smile.

She could see the affection he had for her in his eyes and it made her heart swell—which sent a lance of pain straight through her.

“You’re on bed rest until further notice,” he said solemnly.

“Edgar—”

“I’m goin’ to have a talk with Cecilia and Evangeline to make sure you don’t do somethin’ rash, like tryin’ to get out of bed,” he interrupted.

She sank back into her pillows, knowing he was probably right. At least for now. But Leah had never been good about sitting around doing nothing.

And with her feeling as if she still needed to prove herself to Edgar and Amon, the idea that she was confined to her bed for who knew how long made her feel almost desperate to get back onto her feet.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I never should’ve let you try jumpin’. I shouldn’t have encouraged you. If I hadn’t, you wouldn’t have gotten hurt.”

“This isn’t your fault, Edgar.”

He shrugged. “Feels like it is.”

“It’s not,” she said firmly.

“It’s just—I was afraid I lost you and I couldn’t bear it if I did,” he said softly.

“Leah, you’ve come to mean the world to me. You’re the best thing that’s ever happened to me and I couldn’t handle losin’ you.”

Tears welled in the corners of her eyes, and she blinked them away. Hearing him express his feelings for her made Leah feel special.

He wasn’t a man who was entirely open with his feelings, and hearing Edgar let himself be open and vulnerable with her meant the world.

It made her genuinely feel like his wife and somebody he cared about. Maybe even loved.

But she couldn’t help but recall Amon’s words and how harshly he had spoken of her. And for the first time, she couldn’t refute what he’d said.

Leah started to wonder if he was right. Maybe she didn’t belong out there on the ranch. She had no knowledge, no experience, and even though she was learning things quickly, she was still learning.

And while she was learning, she was wreaking all kinds of havoc, causing disruptions, hurting animals, and destroying things.

She wondered how long it would be before Edgar started to think along the same lines as his father, how long it would be before he

started to see her as a liability rather than an asset.

How long it would be before he started to resent her for her failings.

She heard Amon's words echoing through her mind over and over again, and each time, she felt that dagger of self-reproach driven a little deeper into her heart.

"Everything's goin' to be all right," Edgar said encouragingly. "You just rest up and heal. That's all you need to worry about right now."

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I'm sorry I've made such a mess of things. Again."

Edgar took her hand in his, giving it a gentle squeeze.

"You've got nothin' to be sorry for. Nothin'," he said. "Now, get some rest." He leaned down and kissed the back of her knuckles, then walked out of the room, leaving her to rest.

But Leah wasn't able to rest easily. Not while she felt the pressure of Amon's words pressing down on her even harder than before.

She needed to heal quickly and keep Edgar from finding his way to believing his father's words—and believing in her, instead.

“**I** miss home,” Evangeline pouted.

“This *is* home,” Leah replied.

“It doesn’t feel like it,” Evangeline said. “And at least when you worked in the factory you weren’t getting hurt like you are now.”

“I’m fine,” Leah grunted as she poured a bucket of slop into the pig trough.

It had been a couple of weeks since her accident and she was moving around a bit better. Breathing wasn’t as much of a struggle, and she was feeling something closer to normal.

Leah wasn’t anywhere close to one hundred percent yet, but she felt as if she were starting to get there. Or was at least, on the road toward it.

Finally able to move without screaming in agony again, Leah had started getting herself back to work, back to trying to prove her worth.

She knew it was probably too soon for her to be doing the sort of

physical labor she was doing, but she couldn't keep laying in bed doing nothing. She'd heard the cutting, nasty remarks Amon had been making, sure that he'd been intentionally speaking loud enough so she would overhear.

He had been even more condescending and rude since her accident, doing all he could to keep trying to drive a wedge between her and Edgar.

For his part, Edgar had been ignoring his father's jabs. He had been spending time with her while she was laid up and continued telling her that everything was going to be all right.

He'd told her to just ignore his father and that what he thought didn't matter. She wanted to believe him, but she continued to worry about the corrosive effect of his father's words.

The man had made it his mission to poison Edgar's mind against her and split them up.

Leah got to her feet and stretched herself out a bit. Her muscles were stiff and sore after working in the fields all day.

She was thankful that Evangeline had taken to shadowing her and helping out where she could. But Leah thought it was more because she was unhappy there and just wanted to be near her—the only familiar and comforting person to her.

Amon's hostility and looming presence cast a long shadow and made her more than a little uncomfortable.

"Hey, why don't you go and spend some time with your ducks out at the pond," Leah said. "I need to go into town to get some supplies."

“I can come with you.”

“I’d rather you stayed here. If not at the pond, why don’t you see what Cecilia needs help doing, huh?”

“Okay,” Evangeline pouted.

She ruffled her little sister’s hair and offered her a smile before having Alberto help her hitch the horses to the buckboard.

Over the past few weeks, she’d been taking on more of the responsibility to go into town to fetch supplies to help keep the ranch stocked and operational—something Amon said was just another way she was shirking her duties.

Nothing she did was ever good enough for him.

“Aye. How you feelin’ today then, Leah?”

She looked up as she stepped into the mercantile to see Matthew’s smiling face. A good-natured man who was quick to laugh, the older Irishman had thick white hair, a bushy white beard, and blue eyes that sparkled mischievously.

He was thick around the middle, had rosy cheeks, a smile on his face most of the time, and spoke in a thick Irish brogue. Leah had become very fond of him.

“Getting better every day,” she replied.

“That’s good tae hear. I’m glad tae see you up and around again, lass.”

“I’m doing my best but it’s still hard to do the physical work,” she

said. "I'm not completely healed just yet."

"Then maybe ye shouldnae be pushin' yerself so hard."

She gave him a small shrug. "I feel like I need to. I need to contribute."

"There are other ways tae contribute, ye ken," he said. "Ye daeane have tae be breakin' horses or pullin' crops tae contribute."

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"Well, tae be honest, I could use some help around here," he said. "I'm nae gettin' around as well as I used tae when I was younger."

"Are you offering me a job, Matthew?" she asked, a slow smile spreading across her lips.

"Aye. I think I am," he said. "I'm offerin' a fair wage for an honest day's work. Plus, it'll nae be as strenuous as workin' thae fields out there."

"That's very kind, Matthew. Very generous, and I appreciate the offer," she replied. "May I think about it?"

"Aye. Of course. Give it some thought," he said. "Now, let me have that list of things ye'll be needin'."

Leah gave him the list Edgar had written out for her and as Matthew scanned it, she considered his offer. It really was very kind, and it would be perfect for her.

It was a job that wouldn't be physically demanding but would still bring in some income for the ranch. The job would be good for her

in a number of different ways.

But as she thought about it, she felt a stab of guilt. Her place was on the ranch, and thinking about stepping away from her duties—her responsibilities—filled her with a sense of shame.

Though she was sorely tempted, Leah knew she couldn't accept Matthew's offer. Not without drowning in her guilt.

“**A**nother day and she still ain’t out in the fields,” Amon grumbled. “Still ain’t pullin’ her weight around here.”

Edgar bit back the sigh that threatened to spill out of his mouth.

It had been a long day, and he was bone tired. Far too tired to listen to his father running his mouth any longer—he’d already had to listen to it for most of the day.

The only time he’d gotten a break from Amon’s incessant yammering was when they’d split up to work on different things. And those breaks just didn’t seem to last long enough.

“I seem to remember you taking a month off when you fell out of the hay loft after a night of heavier-than-usual drinkin’,” Edgar said.

His father’s expression darkened and a scowl crossed his face. Ever since she’d gotten hurt, his father’s attacks on Leah had gotten worse.

The insults and jabs were nonstop and seemed to be growing more vicious by the day. Edgar had tried arguing with his father. He’d

tried to show Amon why Leah wasn't what he thought she was.

He'd tried to refute his beliefs. But it was like arguing with a brick wall. His father wouldn't budge and simply kept trying to split them up.

Oh, he said it was because he worried about Edgar. Didn't want him getting hurt the way he'd been hurt when his mother died.

What Edgar had come to realize, though—with Leah's help, of course—was that his father was simply afraid of being alone. He was afraid that Edgar, now that he was married, would abandon him.

He was Amon's last link to his mother and Leah believed he didn't want Edgar to leave him behind, the way he felt his mother had done when she died.

It was preposterous, of course. But there was no arguing with him. So, Edgar had decided he was done arguing. At least, he was trying to be. His father made it difficult to remain quiet sometimes.

Instead, whenever his father launched into one of his verbal barrages, Edgar would simply remind Amon of one of his own faults or a time when he had failed or done something stupid.

It usually shut him up, although it usually angered him, too. But Edgar didn't care. He wanted to irritate his father as much as Amon irritated him.

"This life is hard, Edgar. You know it is," he said. "That woman—"

"Her name is Leah," Edgar interrupted him. "Leah. And she's my wife, not some woman. I'd really like it if you could show her even

a fraction of the respect she's shown you."

"She's soft. She ain't built for this life, son. She ain't cut out for it," he pressed.

"And one of these days she's goin' to figure that out—and when she does, she's gonna up and leave. You mark my words, she's gonna leave at some point."

"You have no idea what you're talkin' about."

They rode on in silence for a few minutes as Edgar stewed over his father's words. Leah wouldn't just up and leave. She loved him. She may not have said the words, exactly, but Edgar knew she did.

He could see it in her eyes whenever she looked at him. And he knew he loved her, as well. She wouldn't just give up on what they had—what they were building—and abandon him. She wouldn't.

But as he thought about it more, a current of fear rippled through his heart. Edgar had heard Evangeline talking about how unhappy she was lately, talking about how much she missed Boston.

And knowing Leah would do anything to make her happy, there was a small sliver of worry inside of him that she would give in and take Evangeline back to Massachusetts.

He feared that his father's constant belittlement and badgering would eventually take a toll and that, combined with Evangeline wanting to return to Boston, would make her give in and head back to the east coast. He doubted it would happen like that, but Edgar couldn't dismiss it entirely, either.

The tension between them was thick and Edgar was gritting his

teeth. Most days he was able to brush off his father's slings and arrows, able to ignore the constant entreaties to end their marriage and send Leah back to Boston.

But today it was sticking in his craw and upsetting him more than normal. Edgar feared they were coming to a crisis point and once things exploded, they would never be the same between them again.

"What's that?"

His father's voice pulled him out of his head, and he followed his father's gaze. The sun was slipping toward the horizon and the dark purple and blue hues of dusk were starting to settle in the east.

There was a glow upon the low-lying clouds, though, vibrant shades of red and orange. It was fiery, like a sunrise, but was somehow different. It was more intense. Vivid.

Edgar raised his nose and sniffed at the air, and as he did, he knew what it was. A knot formed in the pit of his stomach and he groaned miserably.

"What is it?" Amon asked.

"Wildfire," Edgar replied. "And I'm assumin' it's a big one."

The smell of smoke was strong in the air as Amon climbed down off his horse. The smoke left dark smudges across the sky and cast the world around him in a hazy, dirty light.

Everything looked like it was being shot through an amber prism, giving a strangely colored tint to it all. Worried about the fires, Amon had come to town needing to gather whatever information he could.

He still remembered a story his pa had told him about a wildfire that had swept through when he was a boy. His daddy had said that fire wiped out the entire town; left everything—including the family homestead—in a pile of smoking ruin.

They'd barely gotten out with their lives and the only thing that saved them was information and preparation. It was advice Amon had taken to heart simply because fires weren't uncommon.

Not all of them were the monsters that consumed wide swaths of land this one seemed to be, though.

Amon tied the mare off at the hitching post outside the mercantile. With vendors coming in from all the surrounding towns, Matthew

was usually the best source of information in all of Coyote Hollow.

If anybody were going to know about the fires, it would be him. And Amon wanted the best information he could gather to make the best possible decision possible for what came next.

Matthew was busy putting things from the shelves into boxes and gathering up all his merchandise for easy transport. It seemed he was preparing, which didn't strike Amon as particularly good news.

"Gettin' yourself ready to skip out of town?" Amon asked.

Matthew put some canned goods into a box and nodded as he stood up. "Aye. 'Tis best tae be prepared," he said.

"Thae last bleedin' thing I want is tae lose everythin'. At least if I keep me inventory close at hand, I'll be able to reopen again sooner rather than later."

"You sound like a man who thinks this fire's gonna sweep the town away."

"Unless it burns itself out, it just might, lad," he said. "If I were ye, I'd make preparations tae."

"Do you know where it's burning? How far away?"

"Man came through about an hour ago. Says it's burnin' a couple days' ride tae thae east of us," Matthew said. "But with thae bleedin' winds as strong as they are, it could whip that fire closer tae us a lot faster."

Amon nodded. The winds were always a problem when a fire

started. A strong gust could carry a burning ember miles from the original fire and set an entirely new one.

And the winds the last couple of days had been terrible.

Images of his ranch burning to the ground flashed through Amon's mind, sending a white-hot bolt of fear shooting through him. The winds were blowing in the opposite direction at the moment, but Amon knew well that could change in a heartbeat and send the fire straight at Coyote Hollow.

He and Matthew chatted for a few minutes about a few superficial topics. It was obvious to Amon they were both trying to take their minds off the death and destruction that was in the back of both of their minds.

When Amon turned to go, Matthew stopped him. "When ye see her, can ye ask Leah if she's made a decision yet?"

"A decision about what?" Amon asked.

"I offered her a job here at thae store," he replied. "She was goin' tae give it some thought."

Amon nodded. "Sure. I'll ask her about it."

"I'd be obliged, Amon."

Amon tipped his cap to the Irishman then made his way out of the mercantile and to his horse. All the while, he thought about what Matthew had said.

So far as he knew, Leah hadn't mentioned it to Edgar. Or anybody else, for that matter.

Not that she would have ever deigned to talk to Amon about it, but he would have thought she'd have mentioned it to her husband, who would have mentioned it to him.

Knowing she was looking for outside work only reinforced Amon's belief that Leah was not long for life on the ranch. That sooner or later, she would leave the hardscrabble life behind and break his son's heart.

As Amon mounted up and rode out of town, pointing his mare back to the ranch, the blood in his veins boiled and the scowl on his face deepened as he thought about that woman intentionally hurting his son.

“**T**hank you for getting me out of the house today. I think I needed it,” Leah said.

“And thank you for getting me out of another day spent doing all of Leah’s chores,” Evangeline piped up.

They all shared a laugh as Edgar spooned out some of the potato salad Cecilia had made up for them.

Leah had woken up that morning in agony. She’d overdone it in the fields the previous day and spent most of the night in searing pain. The pain had dwindled to a dull roar, but she was still hurting.

“Well, I’m just glad you both wanted to spend a little time together today,” he said. “I think we can all use it.”

“I agree,” Leah said. “As a family.”

“As a family,” Edgar replied.

She gave him a warm smile and gently squeezed his arm. When he’d come in after spending the morning in the fields and proposed

the idea of having lunch in the yard, she'd thought it was a wonderful idea.

Things had been tense lately and the threat of the fires that were burning had only increased that tension. Sitting out in the yard having lunch seemed like a nice break from it all.

“Do you think the fires will turn this way?” Evangeline asked.

Edgar took a swallow of his iced tea and frowned. “Unless the wind turns, I think we’ll be all right.”

And as if his words provided the cue, a gust of warm wind bustled by them carrying the thick odor of smoke along with it. Edgar and Leah exchanged a look and she watched his expression darken slightly as concern crept across his features.

Not wanting to alarm Evangeline, though, he smoothed his face and put a smile back on. The truth was, Leah was terrified of the possibility the fire could ravage the ranch—their home.

In Boston, there were people who helped extinguish any fires that broke out. But out there on the plains, there was nobody and nothing but grass and trees for the flames to consume.

Leah felt a cold chill wash over her as Amon rode into the yard. She watched him slip off his horse and hand the reins to Alberto, who led the mount into the barn.

Amon walked toward them, slipping off his gloves. His expression was dark and grim, his eyes narrowed. Assuming he'd gotten some news about the fire when he was in town, Leah braced herself.

He stopped at the table, and they all looked up at him. Amon's

eyes bored into hers and she could see the rage burning in his gaze.

“There somethin’ you want to tell us, girl?” he snapped. “Somethin’ you want to tell my son?”

Leah exchanged a look with Edgar, who appeared as perplexed as she was. She turned her eyes to Amon, confused. “I’m not sure what you—”

“I got to talkin’ to Matthew down at the mercantile,” he said, his voice low and gruff. “And I know he offered you a job.

“When was you goin’ to tell us? Or were you just gonna slink off into the night like the coward you are?”

“Father!” Edgar snapped as he jumped to his feet. “Apologize to Leah right now.”

“Apologize? For what?” Amon fired back. “I told you she was gonna run out on you. I told you it was only a matter of time, that she wasn’t cut out for this life.

“And look—now, she’s thinkin’ about leavin’ again. Leavin’ you.”

Leah felt her cheeks flush with color and she looked away, having a hard time masking the emotions swirling around inside of her. Yes, she felt guilty for not mentioning it to Edgar—but she really hadn’t thought she needed to.

She’d spent some time turning the idea over in her mind. But she’d ultimately decided she wasn’t going to take Matthew’s offer.

Not that she wasn’t tempted, she had been. But she’d realized that wasn’t what she wanted.

“Why do you have to be so mean?” Evangeline shouted as she jumped to her feet. “My sister has been nothing but kind to you since we moved here. And all you do is behave like a monster in return.”

They all turned to her, expressions of shock on all their faces. Evangeline was always so soft spoken and deferential. Leah had never seen her get so worked up, let alone shout at anybody like that before.

Before she could say anything, though, Evangeline turned and dashed off, leaving them all staring after her. As she thought about it, the more enraged Leah became.

That he had upset her baby sister like that made her blood boil. That he felt so comfortable saying such terrible things to her made her even angrier.

“How dare you,” she hissed. “I know no matter what I say, it won’t ever be good enough for you, but I’d already decided not to accept Matthew’s offer.

“I’d already decided that my place is here on the ranch, doing the work I love. Doing what I can to help make this ranch successful. And all you’ve done since we got here is treat us like dirt. Lower than dirt.”

“Now, wait just a minute—”

“No, I won’t wait a minute,” she seethed. “I’m tired of walking on eggshells around you, and I’m tired of your cruelty. In fact, I’m tired of you.”

Without waiting for him to respond, she turned and ran after her

sister, tears of anger and frustration flowing down her cheeks.

“D o you even know how ashamed of you Ma would be right now?” Edgar hissed.

His father’s face darkened as he stared at Edgar, his jaw clenched, his eyes tight. Amon looked like he was about to explode in rage. But he somehow managed to hold himself in check—though just barely.

He opened his mouth to reply but Edgar cut him off.

“Leah is my wife. She’s family. And if Ma saw you treatin’ her the way you have from day one, she would be ashamed of you,” he said. “And she wouldn’t have been shy about tellin’ you, either.”

Amon closed his mouth, the reply he was about to fire off dying on his lips. Deep down, Edgar suspected his father knew he was right. But there was no way he was going to admit it. Instead, he opted for silence.

“If you can’t start bein’ a decent human being, bein’ the good man I know you can be, then you and me are gonna be quits, Pa,” Edgar said, his voice hard and low.

“I swear on Ma’s grave that if you can’t start showin’ my wife the respect she deserves, we’re goin’ to be done. Do you understand me?”

His father stared at him balefully, choosing to not respond. Edgar, having said his piece, turned and walked away, following Leah. He needed to make sure both she and Evangeline were all right.

He found them both beneath the willow tree near the pond.

Leah was holding her little sister, stroking her hair as she murmured to her. Edgar automatically felt awful as he watched Evangeline’s body heaving with sobs.

“I want to go home,” he heard her say. “I want to go back to Boston. We don’t belong here, Leah. We never will.”

“I disagree,” Edgar said as he sat down beside them.

He looked to the horizon and watched the black clouds of smoke billowing into the sky, casting the world around them in a dirty orange light. He said a few silent words to whoever might be listening that the winds didn’t shift and that the fire burned itself out quickly.

He turned back to Leah, who gave him a small smile. Evangeline finally sat back, wiping the tears from her eyes. The girl’s face was red and blotchy, her eyes puffy, and he silently cursed his father for doing this to her.

“Your father hates us,” Evangeline said, sounding miserable.

“No, your sister taught me something. It’s not you he hates. He hates himself, little duck. He’s just taking it out on you,” Edgar

said.

“I know that don’t make anythin’ feel better, but his anger has nothin’ to do with you. And I’m sorry he’s made you feel so unwelcome.

“Because, believe me, you’re more than welcome here. This is your home.”

“It’s not my home,” Evangeline said defiantly.

“But it is,” Leah said softly. “It’s very much your home.”

“I love having you both here,” Edgar said. “And I love that you’re my family. I know this is a big adjustment, but you’ll get used to things out here, little duck. I promise you that.

“And I’m going to do everything in my power to make sure you come around and enjoy bein’ out here every bit as much as I enjoy you bein’ here.”

“I don’t know that I’m ever gonna feel that way,” Evangeline said.

“All I’m askin’ is that you give it a chance. That you give me a chance,” Edgar said. “I just want you to know that however my father feels, that’s not how I feel. He’s irrelevant.

“What he thinks or feels—or doesn’t think or feel—it doesn’t matter. The only thing that matters is how we all feel about each other.

“And what I feel is that I’m glad you and Leah are here. I enjoy you both. This is as much your home as it is Amon’s. I want you to know that.”

Evangeline gave him a small, tremulous smile—but a smile, nonetheless. The tears had dried up and she looked like she was willing to at least give it a try.

It made Edgar feel slightly better. He just hoped his words would sink into his father's brain, that he would finally understand and begin to treat them the way they deserved.

“What are you thinking?” Leah asked.

“I was just thinking of a way to make Evangeline feel more at home here.”

“Yeah? What's that.”

Edgar flashed her a crooked grin. “You'll see.”

“**Y**ou shouldn’t be doing this,” Leah whispered. “Not with how—”

Edgar waved her off. “It’s fine. And besides, I think Evangeline’s happiness is more important than anything right now.”

“But your father will be angry.”

Edgar shrugged. “He’s already angry. Him bein’ a little angrier ain’t goin’ to matter too much to me.”

Jonah Cotton, a man who owned a farm not far from Edgar’s, came back out with a fluffy white lamb in his arms. Edgar smiled and took the lamb from him and set it down in the back of the buckboard.

Leah watched it all with a sense of wonder and a smile on her face. The thoughtfulness of the gesture was incredible and heartwarming.

Edgar pulled a couple of dollar bills out of his pocket and handed them over to Jonah.

“Thank you,” the older man said, his voice gruff.

“No, thank you,” Edgar said. “You’ve just made a little girl very happy.”

“Well, I’m glad to do what I can,” Jonah replied with a smile. “Every little girl should be happy.”

Edgar helped Leah onto the seat of the wagon, then climbed on board next to her. They got the buckboard moving and Leah couldn’t stop herself from stealing glances at him.

She had already known that Edgar was a kind man. A thoughtful and considerate man.

But seeing him buy a sheep he probably shouldn’t be spending money on, given how the ranch was struggling, just to make Evangeline happy—it took her affection for him to an entirely new level.

“Everything all right?” he asked.

She nodded, unable to keep the smile off her face. “Better than all right. I don’t think you know how happy Evangeline is going to be.”

“Well then, it’s all worth it.”

“Even if your father lights into you about it?” she asked. “No, actually, *when* your father lights into you about it? I don’t think it’s an if.”

He shrugged. “I’m not too worried about it. He’s always hollerin’ about somethin’,” he said. “I learned a while ago to not hear him

when he gets like that.”

She laughed softly. “Thank you for doing this.”

“You’re welcome,” he replied. “I just want Evangeline to be happy. I want her to start thinkin’ of this as home. And what says home more than havin’ a pet?”

“You’re a good man, Edgar.”

“I’m all right, I suppose,” he replied with a smile.

She looked off into the distance and frowned when she saw the dirty smudges across the sky. Breathing in the smoke-thickened air was almost intolerable.

“Do you think the fire will break this way?” she asked.

Edgar turned his face up to the sky, squinting as he looked at the amber-tinted sun. A frown touched his lips, but he shook his head.

“I don’t think so,” he said. “The wind’s gonna have to make a crazy turn and blow back on us for that to happen.”

“The wind swirls around out here like crazy sometimes.”

He nodded. “It does. So, let’s just hope this isn’t one of those times.”

They pulled the wagon into the yard and Alberto met them there. He took the wagon to the barn to unhitch the team as Leah and Edgar carried the lamb toward the pond out back where they knew they’d find Evangeline.

Amon stood on the porch of the bunkhouse he'd moved into after their last fight. He sat in the shade of the porch with a cigarillo in his mouth, glaring at them both. Leah ignored him and followed Edgar.

Evangeline had her back to them as they approached, and Edgar set the lamb down on the grass behind her. The lamb wandered around in the grass for a moment, and it wasn't until the baby animal bleated that Evangeline turned around.

Her eyes widened in surprise and her mouth fell open in a perfect O. Her gaze shifted from the lamb to Leah and Edgar, then back again.

"Is—is the lamb for me?" she asked.

Leah looked at Edgar, who was smiling wide, then nodded. "She is," Leah said. "Edgar bought it for you."

"We bought it for you," he corrected. "We did. We thought you might like to have a lamb to raise. But it's a big responsibility, Evangeline."

She nodded enthusiastically. "I'll do whatever it takes. Thank you so much," she squealed. "I'll take such good care of her."

"I'll teach you what you need to know about raisin' her," Edgar said.

Evangeline dropped to her knees beside the lamb and threw her arms around its neck. The lamb bleated but seemed to be leaning into her.

It was the happiest Leah had seen Evangeline since they arrived in

Coyote Hollow, and it made her heart swell. She looked over at Edgar, who was smiling as he watched the girl and her lamb.

The rush of emotion she felt for him was so deep she thought she could drown in it.

For the moment, everything seemed perfect. But if there was one thing Leah had learned, it was that it wouldn't last long.

Edgar awoke that morning to find that the winds had shifted overnight. Thankfully, it still wasn't blowing directly back their way just yet.

There was still hope it wouldn't, but the fire continued to burn completely unchecked. Ash drifted from a rapidly darkening sky like snow and the odor of the fire was growing thicker by the day.

"We need to get the animals out of here," Edgar said.

"We can put some of the cows in the barn, but ain't all of them goin' to fit," Amon replied. "Half, maybe. At most. I don't know what we'll do with the other half."

"We can put them in the training ring for now," Edgar replied. "That should be big enough to hold the ones we can't get into the barn."

Amon nodded. "Yeah, maybe. But that ain't gonna fix the bigger problem—the animals are all chokin' on this smoke and ash."

"Yeah," Edgar said. "All we can do is hope the winds turn and blow the smoke out of here."

“Wouldn’t count on it,” Amon said, his tone solemn. “I think those winds are gonna shift and send that fire straight at us.”

“Let’s hope not.”

Amon looked at him. “With everythin’ goin’ on, was it the best time to pick up another animal? I saw you come back with that lamb.”

“The lamb is the least of our problems. It’s small. We can take it,” he said. “Evangeline is watching it—”

“Let me rephrase that. Did you need to spend the money on a lamb at all? Did the kid need a pet that badly?”

“Yeah, Pa, she did,” Edgar snapped defensively. “In no small part thanks to you. Your attitude and the way you treat them...”

Edgar let his voice trail off and he shook his head. He wasn’t going to allow himself to be dragged into this argument. Not now. And not while there was so much on the line.

“I’m not going to do this right now,” Edgar said. “*We* are not going to do this right now.”

“I’m not doing anythin’,” Amon replied defensively.

“We’re not havin’ this argument right now. Better?”

“Fine. If you say so,” his father grumbled.

“Let’s just get to work. Let’s get the cattle into the barn,” Edgar said. “We’ll do what we can for the ones stuck outside.”

Edgar and his father got to work rounding up all the cattle out in the fields. They herded them back to the barn and to the riding ring.

After securing the gate on the ring, he ran over to the pig pen and ushered them into their covered enclosure, then locked them inside.

He was just exiting the pen when Leah came rushing up to him, her face etched with panic.

“What is it?” he asked, noting her fear.

“The crops. They’re dying,” she said. “They’re covered in ash, and I think the air is just too poisonous for them to survive.”

Edgar took his hat off and mopped his brow with his sleeve. That was the worst news at the worst time. But he should have expected it. Amon had wandered over to where they stood.

“Crops are failing,” Edgar said soberly.

Amon’s frown deepened. “That happens, we’re all in a world of hurt. If them crops die and we can’t sell ‘em, we might lose the ranch.”

Edgar cast a wary glance at the sky and watched the thick, black smoke filling the horizon. If the winds changed, they might lose the ranch anyway.

But in practical matters in the here and now, he knew they were in trouble. Without the haul of crops, they had no money coming in, and they would be in trouble.

As he thought about it, an idea occurred to him. He turned to Leah. “Gather up as much cloth as you can. Sheets, blankets—anythin’.”

“What are you thinking, son?” Amon asked.

“We’ll cover as many of the crops as we can. Save what we’re able to,” he said.

Amon nodded. “That’s a good idea.”

“It’s our only idea. So, let’s get to it.”

They set out to get things done. Edgar had no idea if it would work. But at least it gave them something to do besides obsessing about things they had no control over or sitting around sniping at each other.

And right now, with the idea that something lethal and destructive possibly was bearing down on them, that had to count for something.

The sky was cast in vivid shades of red and orange, thick with the odor of the fire. Everything around them was hazy with the smoke.

As Leah drove the buckboard into the town proper, it looked like a scene from a nightmare. The streets were empty and thick drifts of ash were piled up like snow, with more relentlessly falling from the sky.

She knew the fires were still a long way off and were maybe not even coming this way, but she swore she could feel the heat from the driving flames.

“My eyes are stinging,” Evangeline complained.

“Mine, too,” she said.

“The fire’s getting worse. Are we going to die?”

She looked at her little sister, holding her gaze firmly. “No, Evangeline, we are not going to die. The fire will burn itself out soon.”

She hoped what she was saying was true and that her voice held more conviction than she felt. Leah never liked lying to her sister, but she also didn't want to scare her any more than she already was.

But the truth was, Leah had no idea what was going to happen. She'd never been through something like this before, and even though Edgar was trying to portray a picture of calm confidence, she could see the cracks in the façade.

He was worried, which worried her.

"Let's get these things over to the mercantile," Leah said brightly. "We'll sell these and get out of here."

Leah drove the buckboard through the virtually empty streets to Matthew's store and found the doors closed and locked.

She walked to the front windows and cupped her hands on the glass, peering inside. But all she saw were empty shelves and a perpetual gloom.

"Where is he?" Evangeline asked.

Leah shook her head. "I don't know."

Fear rippled through Leah's heart, and she looked around. If she couldn't sell the load of eggs, milk, and butter they were carrying, they were going to be in big trouble.

The ranch needed the money they were going to bring back after selling the dairy products to the mercantile. With crops already failing, they couldn't afford to have no money coming in at all.

“If you’re lookin’ for Matthew, he packed up and lit out yesterday.”

Leah turned to find big Sheriff Turner standing on the walk behind them. He was a good man. Friendly. Confident. But even he looked concerned as he stood there amidst the glowing sky and falling ash.

“A lot of folk are headin’ out. Headin’ east, away from the flames,” he said.

“Do you think the fire will turn and come this way, Sheriff?” Evangeline asked.

He gave her a small smile that didn’t quite reach his eyes. “Well, I don’t rightly know, little one,” he said. “But sometimes, it’s better to be safe than sorry.”

He put a little extra emphasis on his last words as if meant for her. He cut his eyes to her and gave her a tight smile.

“What about you, Sheriff? Are you heading east?” Leah asked.

“At some point, if I need to, I will,” he said. “But for now, until we know if the fire’s comin’ this way, somebody’s got to keep order in town. People lose their minds when somethin’ like this happens.”

Leah nodded. She’d seen people riot before, back in Boston—windows smashed, shops looted, people hurt, some even killed. The memory of it sent a shudder through her.

“Y’all should get back to your ranch,” the sheriff said. “Make a plan to get on out of here, if needs be.”

“We will. Thank you, Sheriff,” Leah replied. “And please, make

sure you stay safe, as well.”

He tipped his hat to them and gave them a tight smile before turning and walking out into the falling ash, making his rounds, and keeping order in what looked like the abandoned town of Coyote Hollow.

Leah looked at her wagon, still loaded down with goods that needed to be sold, and felt a dagger of fear pierce her heart. With no crops to harvest and their perishable goods spoiling, it might not be the fire that destroyed the ranch and her home, after all.

The house was completely still and silent. She lay in bed next to Edgar and though he feigned sleep, she could tell he wasn't—he didn't have that steady, even breath he got when he slept.

She enjoyed that they were sharing a room now and enjoyed even more the intimate moments they shared. It made their marriage feel real. Solid. It made them both happy.

But ever since the fire broke out, there had been an underlying tension between them.

He had been trying to put a brave face on it all, but she could see his fear and unease were growing by the hour. She tried to take comfort in his solid body lying next to her, but her heart still pounded within her.

They were on the verge of losing everything—and they had a massive fire to contend with. It still wasn't clear it was heading in their direction, but even if it didn't, the fallout from the disaster had crippled them.

“You're not sleeping.”

His voice cut through the dark and startled her. But he took his hand in hers and gave it a reassuring squeeze.

“You’re not sleeping, either,” she pointed out.

“What are you thinking about?”

“Everything. Nothing,” she said with a rueful laugh. “I just don’t know what’s going to happen to us. We’re in real trouble. And there’s a fire burning out of control.”

He nodded. “Yeah, things aren’t ideal right now. And I’m sorry for that.”

She rolled over and laid a gentle hand on his cheek. “There’s nothing for you to be sorry for. None of this is your fault.”

He frowned as he flipped onto his side and stared her in the eye. “I wanted to give you a good life. A happy life.”

“And you are. You’ve made me happier than I’ve ever been, Edgar. None of what’s happening right now is your fault.”

He sighed and fell silent, and she could almost feel the weight of the world that he was trying to shoulder. The tension in the air was thick and there seemed to be a host of unspoken words straining the space between them.

“I was thinking that maybe once this is all over, I can find work,” she said. “I’ve got experience in a factory. I can do a lot of other things—”

“I’d rather you didn’t have to. And I don’t think it’ll come to it, anyway,” he said. “This place has been in my family for

generations, and we've known rough times before.

"The ranch has failed in the past but has always risen back up. It will again. We will again. And I want you here with me, not workin' in some factory."

Leah was touched by the compassion and love she heard in his voice, and it made her heart swell. It made her want to believe.

She slipped out of bed and went to the window. Pushing the curtains aside, she sighed heavily.

"What is it?" Edgar asked.

"It's what we feared."

Beyond the window, the sky was an angry shade of red. The flames had crested the mountains in the distance.

The fire was coming their way.

He stood in the yard in naught but his breeches and boots, his face a mask of horror. The mountains in the distance were alight and as the warm wind caressed his skin, Edgar knew his worst fears had been realized.

“Wind’s shifted,” Amon said, his words slurred. “Blowin’ toward us now.”

“And bringing hell with it.”

“We need to save what we can and leave,” Amon said.

Edgar shook his head. He knew his father was right, but the thought of abandoning the ranch—leaving everything he’d ever known to be consumed by the flames—turned his stomach.

He needed to shake off the paralysis that gripped him though and act. Everybody, including his father, were looking to him to lead them. To come up with a plan.

He glared at his father, realizing he could smell the drink on him. Amon had been in the bunkhouse, deep in his cups.

At a time like that, with so much on the line, the disgust he felt for his father couldn't have been deeper.

"We need to save what we can," Edgar said and turned to Leah. "Go and pack some clothes then take the buckboard. You and Evangeline need to ride as far east as you can—"

She shook her head. "I'm not going to leave you."

"Yes, you are. Amon and I will follow as quickly as we can, but we need to take care of some things here first," he said. "And I can't get done what I need to if I'm worryin' about you and Evangeline."

"The pigs," Evangeline cried. "I'll save the pigs while—"

"We'll take care of them, little duck. You just grab some clothes and your lamb, and get on out of here," Edgar cut her off.

"But—"

"No, we don't have time to keep yappin' about this," Edgar said, his voice stern.

"Leah, get some things, get your sister, and get on out of here. My father and I are goin' to save as much of our livestock as we can."

"Edgar, this is my home, too," she said. "I have as much right to fight for it—"

"No. It's too dangerous. Go, Leah," he barked. "You need to go. Now."

Leah flinched and looked at him for a brief moment before nodding. She grabbed Evangeline by the hand and though the girl

struggled, Leah was able to drag her into the house.

Edgar turned and looked at the skyline and frowned. The clouds glowed an angry shade of red as the flames consumed everything on the ground.

The smoke was growing thicker, and Edgar thought he could already feel the heat of the fire.

“We ain’t gonna be able to save all them cattle,” Amon said. “Let alone much else of anythin’. That fire’s movin’ fast.”

“Yeah, well, we might’ve stood a better chance if you were sober,” Edgar snapped, then turned to Alberto who stood there, almost mesmerized by the flames. “Alberto, get our horses saddled quick.

“After that, gather up the pigs and grab whatever else you can. Throw it all into the wagon and scoot east. Get across the river. I’m hopin’ it’ll serve as a fire break and the flames will die there.”

“Si, Mr. Edgar.”

As they all jumped into action, Edgar kept his eyes on the wall of flame that was racing down the side of the mountain. It wouldn’t be long before those flames hit the open ground and then it would have an unimpeded path to the ranch.

Feeling his heart sinking into his stomach, knowing he couldn’t stop the inevitable, Edgar got to work. He would save as much of his life as he could.

The buckboard clattered across the bridge, Leah's mood as dark as the forest around them. But she knew it wouldn't be dark for long. Once the flames reached the woods, the world around them would be lit up as bright as the noonday sun.

Evangeline coughed into her hand, choking on the stench of the smoke and the ash that was falling as thick as a winter blizzard.

Coated in that ash, she clung to her lamb like a drowning man would cling to a piece of driftwood, the tears rolling down her cheeks and cutting lines through the grime.

"Are we really going to leave all the pigs and Edgar and everything else back there?" Evangeline cried. "Everybody and everything's going to get all burned up."

Leah shook her head. "No, honey, they won't. I promise you. Edgar is going to take care of it. He's going to take care of us," she said. "He's not going to let anything happen to us."

"I don't think he can stop it," she said miserably.

Hearing the despondent tone in her little sister's voice broke Leah's

heart. She steered the wagon off the bridge and up the road that cut through the trees.

When she drove the wagon into a clearing, the sound of a loud clattering on the bridge behind them drew her attention. Leah pulled the wagon to a stop and turned around in the seat.

And when she saw Alberto driving a wagon across it, a wide smile spread across her lips. She turned to Evangeline and nudged her.

“Look, Alberto has saved the pigs,” she cried.

Evangeline’s face lit up and she jumped down off the buckboard and ran to Alberto as he pulled into the clearing alongside Leah’s wagon. She slipped down off the driver’s seat and walked back to the other wagon.

Evangeline, still holding onto her lamb, was standing on the wagon steps, looking into the back at the pigs Alberto had saved.

“Where are Edgar and Amon?” she asked.

“They’re still trying to save the cattle,” Alberto said. “The fire’s coming fast. I don’t think they’ll be able to save them all.”

“If they don’t get out of there soon, they’ll be consumed by the flames as well,” Leah muttered.

“Si.” He nodded. “I told them to go but they would not come. They say they’ll be right behind me.”

Leah looked back down the road they’d come and felt her heart flutter with fear. The longer it took for Edgar to join them, the more she feared something terrible had happened to him.

With only him and Amon trying to gather up what they could from the ranch, it was taking longer than it should and putting them in further danger. But if they had help...

“Alberto, can you stay here with Evangeline?” she asked.

He nodded. “*Si*. I can keep an eye on her.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re not going back there,” Evangeline said, looking at her with wide eyes.

“I have to,” she said. “I have to help Edgar—”

“He told you to stay with me.”

“But you’re in a safe place now,” Leah said. “And you’ve got Alberto to look after you.”

“I don’t want you to go,” Evangeline said, her eyes shimmering with tears. “I don’t want anything to happen to you, Leah. If I lost you—”

“You’re not going to lose me,” Leah promised. “I’m just going to go help them gather some things and we’ll be back here before you know it.”

“Leah, I don’t want you to go.”

“I don’t want to go. But I have to. I have to save whatever I can from our new home,” she said. “I don’t want to lose everything, if I can help it.”

"I'm scared," Evangeline said, her voice quavering.

"So am I. But sometimes, even when you're scared, you need to step up and do the brave thing," Leah told her. "Maybe even especially then."

Evangeline looked at her, the lamb held close to her chest, fresh tears tracking through the grime on her face. Leah gave her shoulder a firm squeeze and she held her little sister's gaze.

"I need you to be brave right now, Evangeline," she said. "I'll be back before you know it."

"But what—"

Leah shook her head. "There is no 'but.' I'm going to go do what I must do and come back to you," she said firmly. "I'll be back. Be brave for me, little sister."

Evangeline looked at Leah for a moment, her face etched with fear, but gave her a nod. Leah leaned down and planted a soft kiss on her forehead then turned to Alberto.

"Take good care of her. And if you see the fire jumping the river, get the wagons moving and get out of here," she said. "We'll find you. Just get Evangeline as far away from the fire as you can."

Alberto nodded. "Si. I'll be sure to keep her safe," he said. "You just make sure you and Mr. Edgar and Mr. Amon get back to us safe, too."

"We will," she said.

Leah unhitched one of the horses Alberto had tied to his wagon

and mounted up. She gave Evangeline one last look and a smile before turning and riding back across the bridge and toward the fire.

The smoke was so thick Edgar could hardly see. And the flames were chewing through the open prairie even faster than he'd imagined they could.

From where he was, Edgar could feel the heat carried on the swirling winds that were driving the fire. All around him the cows were lowing loudly, crying out in terror.

He and Amon were on horseback doing their level best to drive them toward the ranch house and, from there, to the river.

All the while, he thought of Leah and her determination to stay behind to help. Her words, "this is my home, too," echoed through his mind over and over again.

She was right, this was her home. And she did have the right to defend it every bit as much as he did.

But Edgar had made the decision to send her away out of fear—and his love for her. He couldn't bear the thought of her out in this nightmare hellscape, trying to herd the cattle alongside him.

As he chased down a wayward calf and pushed it back toward the

main body of the herd, though, he realized he'd done exactly what he hated his father doing to him when he was younger—treating him like a child and taking his decisions away from him.

Leah was a grown woman. A strong woman. And yet, he'd treated her like a little girl. He'd taken her power to make decisions for herself away from her.

While it might be all right to make decisions for somebody like Evangeline, knowing he had her best interest at heart, Leah was his partner. His wife. She was tough, strong, and independent.

And he silently chastised himself for treating her as if she weren't.

Edgar gave his head a shake. There would be time enough for self-recrimination later.

Right then and there, he needed to focus on getting himself, his half-drunk father, and a herd of uncooperative cattle out of the fields alive.

“We need to go,” Amon yelled over the roar of the wind and crackling fire. “We need to push through what we can and leave the rest to fend for themselves.”

Edgar looked back and saw the fence at the rear of their pastures was already alight. The flames leapt high into the air, casting the world around them in flickering orange glow.

The grasses of the field burned, the flames inexorably marching forward and consuming every bit of dry tinder it found. Edgar coughed and pulled his handkerchief up over his nose and mouth.

The smoke was so thick it didn't make much of a difference, but

cutting it down even a little was better than nothing. He noticed that his father followed suit.

The cattle were starting to spread out again as panic overtook them. Some were charging forward, running for the chute Edgar and his father were funneling them toward, others dashing out into other parts of the field.

“Leave them,” his father called. “We have to go. Now, son, we have to get out of here. Those flames will be on us quicker than the blink of an eye.”

The line of flames pressed onward, hungrily chewing up the field. Edgar knew his father was right—they were out of time.

It broke his heart to leave any of their cattle behind knowing they would be overtaken and consumed by the ravenous flames that were eating everything in sight. But better to leave a few to their fates than try to corral them and doom everybody to the same.

“All right,” Edgar called. “Drive them on. Let’s go.”

Shouting and clapping, trying to push the main body of the herd on. Sweat poured down his face in sheets and his back was slicked, his shirt clinging to him uncomfortably.

As they got the main body moving, Edgar found himself wondering how Leah was doing, hoping she had gotten across the river with Evangeline and that Alberto had been able to find them.

He and Amon pressed on, driving the cattle forward. Edgar couldn’t wait to get back to Leah. He silently vowed to himself that he would apologize for sending her away and treating her like a child.

He made a pact with himself that he would never do that again. He would treat her like a grown woman, like the intelligent and tough woman she was.

He promised he would never take her choices away from her and would give her the respect she deserved.

It seemed to take forever and it felt like the flames were licking at his backside, but they got all of the cows they could save out of the fields and moving en masse toward the river.

The cattle were all branded, and they would worry about collecting them all once the fire burned itself out. All they needed was to get them to the river.

“I’ll tie the gate open—make sure the stragglers can get out,” Edgar called. “Then I’ll head for the river. I’ll be right behind you—”

“Good idea. Get that done,” Amon called back. “I need to make sure Alberto got all the horses out of the barn.”

“You should herd the cattle to the river—”

“They’ll get there on their own,” he said. “Go take care of the gate. I’ll meet you on the path to the river.”

“Pa—”

“Go, Edgar. Go now,” he said. “We don’t have time for this foolishness.”

Edgar nodded then set about tying off the gate as his father bounded toward the barn. The fields were disappearing at an alarming rate in the tall flames and thick smoke of the raging

inferno.

He jumped down out of his saddle as his horse whickered loudly, stomping at the ground, clearly uneasy with how close the flames were coming to them. Edgar used a leather thong to tie off the gate, making sure to leave an escape route for the cows who were still in the field.

He felt guilt lancing his heart as he thought of them burning up out there, but there wasn't anything he could do for them.

"Good luck," he muttered to the cows as he hopped back onto his horse.

Edgar set his horse running and pointed himself toward the river. He wasn't long in picking up the trail left behind by the passing herd of cows.

They'd obviously started to run for safety once they got out of the field. He and Amon been able to save most of them and he hoped the stragglers would find their way out before they were devoured by the fire.

As he made his way down the river path, Edgar reined his horse to a stop when he saw Leah riding up the trail toward him.

"What are you doing here?" he asked. "You're supposed to be with Evangeline."

"Alberto is watching her. I came back to see if you needed help," she replied. "I saw the herd of cattle moving to the river. But where is Amon?"

Edgar's eyes widened and he looked at her. "You didn't see him?"

We split up and I assumed he would be on his way to you already.”

She shook her head. “No, I didn’t see him at all.”

“Oh, God,” he said.

Without another word, Edgar wheeled his horse around and galloped back toward the ranch.

By the time they made it back to the ranch, the house and the barn were already fully engulfed in flames. The roar of the fire was louder than he believed they could be, and the heat was so intense, Edgar was half afraid his skin was going to start melting from his bones.

He looked to Leah, who wore a horror-stricken expression on her face as she gazed upon the nightmare scene around them.

“Where’s your father?” she called over the roar of the flames.

“He was heading into the barn—”

As if his words were the cue, one whole side of the barn collapsed in on itself with a thunderous crash.

Edgar jumped down off his horse and raced toward the blazing inferno and if Leah hadn’t maneuvered Shallot to get in his way, he might have run headlong into the flames.

She circled around him again and looked down. “Don’t be stupid,” she called. “You go charging in there, you’re only going to get yourself killed.”

“My pa is—”

“If Amon was in there, I’m sorry, but he’s gone, Edgar,” she said.
“Nobody could have survived that.”

He took another step toward what remained of the structure and knew she was right. His entire body was slick with sweat and he was continually mopping his brow.

Tears welled in his eyes as the fact that his father was gone hit him. Amon wasn’t a perfect man. Most times, he wasn’t even a good man.

But no matter what, he was still Edgar’s pa and he mourned for the loss of a parent. He hadn’t always been the way he was, and Edgar was trying to hold onto the good memories he had of the man.

“We need to go, Edgar,” Leah called to him.

He nodded and just as he started to turn, another large piece of the barn collapsed. It hit the ground with a sound like a cannon going off, sending flaming debris and large chunks of wood scattering everywhere.

Edgar tripped over a rock and hit the ground with a hard thud. As he did, he felt something large and hot fall on him.

He screamed as it started to sear his flesh. Edgar’s entire body grew rigid, every muscle in his body taut, and felt like he was being crushed in a fist of sheer agony.

“Edgar!”

Leah’s voice cut through the pain, pulling him back to the present.

He bucked his body and sent the chunks of the barn that had landed on him flying.

He was able to roll out from under it and scrambled to his hands and knees, crawling forward to Leah, who'd jumped down off her horse and was rushing to him.

She had just reached him when they both heard the sound of his father's voice. Leah helped him to his feet and together they turned.

The barn's collapse had revealed that he was on the other side of it, trapped beneath a heavy beam that was starting to burn. But a wall of flame separated them from him.

"I need to get him," Edgar croaked.

He had just started toward his horse when a powerful lance of agony speared his body. He dropped to a knee then onto his back, writhing in pain.

He tried to struggle back to his feet but the pain was just too much. Leah knelt beside him and put a gentle hand on his shoulder.

"You can't do it," she said. "You're hurt."

"I have to."

Leah shook her head, a look of steely determination in her eyes. "No. I'll go and get him," she said firmly. "You stay here."

O n Shallot's back once more, Leah pulled her handkerchief up over her mouth and nose. She looked around at the flames that were dancing high into the air, destroying everything they touched.

This was what hell must look like.

The smoke was thick and cloying but she drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly. Her heart raced so hard that all she could hear was it pounding in her ears, even over the roar of the flames.

What she was about to do was risky. It was stupid. But it was the only thing she could do.

If she did nothing, she was leaving Amon to be consumed by the flames that were creeping closer.

The heat was so intense, sweat cascaded down her face and had already soaked through her blouse, making it stick to her skin uncomfortably.

"Leah, don't," Edgar croaked. "Just give me a minute."

“Amon doesn’t have a minute,” she called back.

Edgar still knelt on the ground, holding onto his mount’s reins as if he intended to get back up and try to save his father. He was in no shape to do anything, though.

His shirt and breeches were charred from the debris that had fallen on him and the agony he was in couldn’t be more clearly written upon his face.

“Stay here,” she called. “I’ll be right back.”

Without waiting for him to reply, Leah nudged Shallot into motion and sent her barreling straight toward the wall of flame that separated them from Amon. Shallot whickered loudly, but with the courage born only of trust between rider and mount, she headed straight at the wall of flame.

Leah summoned every bit of strength and bravery she could muster and, using every trick Edgar had taught her the day she was injured, leapt Shallot over the wall of flame.

The mare whinnied loudly but stuck the landing perfectly.

Leah cried out in relief and stroked the mare’s neck, gripped by sheer disbelief it had worked. She had jumped Shallot over the fire.

It was only when she heard Amon’s voice that she was pulled back to the present and realized her dilemma. Leah was in a clearing but was surrounded by flames that were moving closer to her.

She looked down at Amon, who was staring back at her with utter shock written across his face.

As she slipped out of the saddle and landed on the ground, Shallot started to prance nervously, pawing at the dirt. “Easy, girl,” Leah said. “We’ll get out of here in just a minute.”

She tied Shallot to a nearby fence that was miraculously still intact and not burning—yet, anyway. She turned to Amon and dropped to her knees.

She grabbed the large beam he was caught beneath and tried to move it. Amon was still staring at her with disbelief etched into his features.

“You—you risked yourself for me,” he said. “Why would you do that?”

She grimaced. “Like it or not, we’re family, Amon,” she said. “I love your son and I know he’d be devastated if anything happened to you.”

“Is he all right?”

“He will be,” she said. “But he’ll be better once we get you out of here. Are you hurt?”

“Nothin’ that won’t heal,” he said. “I just can’t get any leverage on this damn beam.”

Leverage. That was it. That was what she needed.

Leah didn’t have the strength to lift the beam herself. But if she could leverage it and take enough of the weight off that Amon could use his strength to get out from under it, they both might be able to survive.

She looked around frantically and cried out in relief when she spotted a steel pole. She got to her feet, then ran over and grabbed it.

Leah wedged the end of it underneath the beam, then used a round chunk of wood she'd found as the fulcrum.

"All right," she said. "I'm going to try to lever the beam up. At the same time, I need you to push and slide yourself out from under it. Do you understand?"

He nodded. "I got it."

"All right. On three."

Sweat rolled down her body and Leah's heart was thundering within her. She had no idea if this was going to work or not, but she silently prayed that it would.

"All right, one..."

What was left of the barn crashed down, shaking the ground beneath her feet and sending sparks and embers spraying high into the air.

"Two..."

The roar of the flames seemed to grow louder and Shallot whinnied with something akin to panic in her voice. Leah cut a glance over at the mare and saw her pulling hard at the reins she'd tied to the post.

A loud crack sounded and Leah knew it wouldn't be long before the fence broke, and Shallot was able to get free. And if that

happened, she and Amon were done for.

They'd have no way out of the rapidly closing circle of fire.

"Three..."

Leah conjured all the physical strength she could and powered down on the steel pole at the same time Amon pushed upward. He slid himself free and Leah let out a deep breath as she allowed the heavy wooden beam to fall.

Amon was trying to get to his feet but had a noticeable limp. He saw her looking and shook his head.

"Ankle. Just a sprain at worst," he said. "Other than some cuts and bruises, I'm fine. Now, let's mount up and get out of here."

After untying her, Leah climbed onto Shallot's back then helped Amon up behind her. He gripped her waist tightly as she wheeled the mare around to give her enough space to make the jump.

Shallot didn't need much encouragement. She was as eager to be out of that fiery ring of death as they were.

Shallot sprinted toward the wall of flame and nimbly jumped over it. She landed with ease and Leah guided her over to where Edgar knelt in the dirt, his face a mask of sheer agony.

Amon leapt off Shallot's back then ran to Edgar, taking up the reins. "We need to get out of here, son. Can you ride?"

Edgar nodded but said nothing. Amon climbed up into the saddle and reached down, taking Edgar's good hand to haul him up onto the back of the horse.

Edgar leaned heavily against his father's back, wrapping his good arm around Amon's waist.

"Are we ready to go?" Leah asked.

"More than ready," Amon said, giving her a look of respect for the first time since she'd arrived from Boston. "Let's get out of here."

They galloped out of the yard just as the ranch house collapsed in on itself in a fiery heap. It tore at Leah's heart to see her home succumb to the flames, but she reminded herself the most important thing about the whole ranch was hanging onto Amon.

Home wasn't a building. It wasn't a house. As far as Leah was concerned, Edgar was home to her.

And that was a home that was still standing just as solidly as ever.

“**A**re you crazy?” Edgar asked.

She shrugged and gave him a half-smile. “Maybe a little.”

“That was the bravest and the stupidest thing I’ve ever seen,” he said. “But mostly the bravest. Thank you for saving him.”

“I couldn’t let him die,” she said. “Regardless of my feelings about him, he’s your father. I couldn’t turn my back on him like that.”

“Well, I’m grateful,” he said.

They had driven their wagons and the animals further south until they found a clearing beside a lake. There, Leah was tending to his wounds while Alberto saw to his father.

Evangeline sat near the edge of the lake still clutching her lamb, stroking its fur as she looked out across the water. Her eyes were glazed over and she had a haunted expression on her face.

It was going to take a little while for her to overcome the trauma of what she experienced. But she was a tough girl and he knew she’d get past it in time.

They were a good distance from the flames. The air was still thick with smoke and the smell of the fire, but here, they could actually breathe.

As Edgar looked into Leah's eyes, he saw them shimmering with tears and he didn't doubt she was thinking about the last thing he'd seen as they pulled away from the ranch—their home collapsing into a fiery ruin.

Using his good hand, he took hers and gave it a gentle squeeze. "Everything's goin' to be all right," he said. "The fire isn't goin' to make it past the river."

"Even if it doesn't, we have nothing to go back to," she said, her voice wavering. "Our home is—it's gone."

He nodded and gave her a smile. "Kind of seems like a good opportunity to build something new and start our life together, doesn't it? In a new home without all the old ghosts hangin' around?" he asked.

"I kind of think havin' a place that's fresh and is what we decide to make it sounds nice."

She laughed softly as the tears spilled down her cheeks. "I never took you for the eternal optimist."

Still gripping her hand, he gave her a smile. "I'm learnin' to appreciate the good things I have in my life."

Edgar brought her hand to his lips and kissed the back of her knuckles. She smiled wide and looked at him with the purest love he'd ever seen in her eyes. It made his heart swell until it felt like it might burst.

Edgar believed what he'd said to her. He truly felt they could get a fresh start in a new home.

A new house would be like shining sunlight into places that had been left in the dark for ages. And the things in the dark had been left to molder and rot.

That rot was the past, and the memories contained in that house had been a constant dark cloud that hung over them—a dark cloud they'd been unable to get out from under it no matter what they did.

With a new house, they had a chance to build new memories as they built their life together. They could choose to fill that house with nothing but love and laughter.

And while Edgar wasn't choosing to forget about his mother, he was choosing to fill their new home with the better memories of her he had—her smile and her devotion to living a good and beautiful life.

A house filled with children and laughter. A home filled with love.

It was said that fire, for all its destructive power, was cleansing. It burned away the old and rotten, and made way for the new, clean, and healthy.

When the land burned and lay scorched and fallow, it was never for long. Soon enough, life took hold again and new trees, plants, and flowers, all of them clean and vibrant, sprang up to reclaim the land.

For all the ruin it brought, fire also brought healing and rebirth.

“We’ll rebuild, Leah,” he said gently. “We’ll build it bigger and better than before. And it will be ours. We can all make a fresh start in our new home, free of the past.”

“He’s right. The fire might have been the best thing that could have happened to us.”

They both turned to see his father walking over to them. He dropped to a knee and gave them both a long look, his expression one of determination but also one of gratitude.

He took Leah’s other hand and squeezed it. “I was wrong about you. I was wrong about a lot of things, but mostly about you,” he said.

“I’ve treated you poorly and that’s a shame I’ll live with the rest of my days. But I wanted to say that I’m sorry.

“I wanted to ask for your forgiveness and say I hope that like a new growth after a fire, you and me, we can start our relationship over. Now that the bad stuff’s been burned away, I hope you’ll give me the chance to grow somethin’ new with you.”

She smiled softly as tears spilled down her cheeks. “I’d like that, Amon,” she said. “I’d like that a lot.”

He gave her an awkward half-grin. “I would, too,” he said, then shook his head. “Thank you for comin’ back for me, Leah.

“I ain’t never seen nobody do somethin’ so brave before. What you did took more courage than I got. And I’m grateful to you.”

“I’m just glad it worked out,” she said.

“I also wanted to say that I heard you talkin’ once, and you were right. I saw you as a threat. I didn’t want you to take my son away from me.

“I mean, it’s true I never want him to feel the pain I felt when my Geraldine died, but one thing she taught me was that you never know what real love and real happiness is if you don’t take the risk,” he said.

“I was unwillin’ to take that risk after she passed and in my head, I was afraid of my son takin’ that risk, too. I didn’t want him to feel what I felt. I just...”

His words trailed off and he looked down. And for the first time in his life, Edgar saw tears spilling down his father’s cheeks.

His eyes were red-rimmed, his nose red and his cheeks blotchy, and tears rolled down his face.

“It’s all right,” Leah said. “This new home we’re going to build—together—can be a fresh start for all of us. We can unyoke ourselves from the past and move into the future together. As a family.”

“A family,” Amon said, rolling the word around in his mouth as if trying to get used to it again. “I’d like that. I’d like that a lot.”

“I would, too,” Edgar said.

“As long as I can keep my lamb, I would, too,” Evangeline piped up, giving them all a good laugh.

Edgar watched as Leah and Evangeline spoke with his father and it filled his heart with a warmth that brought a smile to his face.

Despite the fire raging in the land around them and all the destruction it was raining down, Edgar felt the seeds of hope being planted in the scorched earth.

And he knew those seeds would sprout, growing something new and something beautiful for them.

Though the world around them looked like something out of a nightmare, the skies would clear, the air would become fresh, and the soil would be filled with rich nutrients that would bring the world back vibrant and green.

In spite of the destruction raging all around them, Edgar felt hope. And it was a beautiful feeling.

Epilogue

O *ne Year Later...*

It had been a long and grueling year, but Coyote Hollow, after being completely destroyed in the wildfires, had come back from the dead.

The townspeople all rallied around each other and rebuilt homes and businesses alike. The town was flourishing despite it being nothing but smoking timber and ashes just twelve short months ago.

Edgar lay in bed, a smile upon his face as he thought about where his life had been to where it was now. It had been quite the journey—one that had left him happy and fulfilled on more levels than even had had expected.

He had his wife he loved with everything in him and a sister-in-law he absolutely adored. He also had his father back.

It had been a year since Amon had taken a drink, and he was more like the man Edgar had known while his mother was alive than the miserable drunk he'd been since. And Edgar was over the moon about it.

Leah stirred beside him, her long hair tickling his chest as she moved. He planted a gentle kiss on the top of her head, and she murmured, her voice still thick with sleep.

She looked up at him with a gentle smile on her full, red lips. "Good morning," she said. "Have you been lying there staring at me sleeping for long?"

He shrugged. "For a little while, I suppose."

"That's kind of creepy, don't you think?"

He laughed softly. "Creepy? Admiring the beauty of the woman I love is creepy?"

"While I'm sleeping it is. How would you like it if I watched you while you slept?"

"I'd actually like that quite a lot. I always enjoy when you watch me."

"That's because you're a peacock. A preener."

"Only for you, my love. Only for you."

She gave him an affectionate smile and they laughed together as Leah snuggled up closer to him. Edgar reveled in the feeling of her soft, warm body pressed to his and felt his arousal stirring.

He never seemed able to get enough of her intimate affections. But more than that, he loved the quiet moments they shared together more than anything.

Edgar relished the time they spent cuddled in bed together, their

bodies pressed to each other, nothing but love flowing between them. Those quiet, harmonious moments they shared meant the world to him.

“So? How did you enjoy your first night in our brand new home?” he asked.

“Well, you certainly made it memorable for me. So, thank you for that,” she replied with a flirtatious grin on her lips.

“That certainly goes both ways,” he said. “And I was just thinking about making a memorable morning.”

She laughed and cast a meaningful glance down at him. “I can tell,” she said. “And if everybody weren’t already awake, I would most definitely oblige you.”

Edgar held still and listened and, sure enough, heard Evangeline and Amon out in the great room laughing together. They had come so far, those two. All of them, actually.

They had gone from strangers to family, and Edgar couldn’t be prouder of his father for turning that corner and becoming the man he always knew he could be.

He’d taken a shine to Evangeline and treated her almost like the daughter he never had.

“Those two have become thick as thieves,” Leah said.

Edgar nodded. “Yes, they are. And I do believe I heard Amon talking to Mr. Cotton about buying another lamb or two for a surprise birthday gift for Evangeline.”

Leah laughed softly. "I'm just so glad your father has warmed to her."

"He's warmed to you, too, you know," he said.

"I know, and I'm beyond thrilled about that," she replied. "But I thought it was more important for Evangeline and him to get along."

"She really needed that after the way things started. He's made her feel welcome."

"I'm proud of my pa. He's an entirely new man."

"Who would have thought a disaster could have brought us all together?"

"Sometimes, that's just the way things work out," he said. "It's strange, but you just never know what's going to force a change in people."

"That's true. But as well as things worked out, to be honest, I hope we never have to go through something like that again," she said.

"That makes two of us," he said with a laugh.

They lapsed into a comfortable silence. Leah laid with her head on his chest, tracing lazy circles on his stomach with her fingertip.

She thought he'd fallen asleep but when she looked up, she saw that he was just staring off into space with an enigmatic little smile curling the corners of his mouth upward.

"What's the smile for?" she asked.

“I was just thinking of something my mother said. She told me once that the greatest form of happiness you can find is loving and letting yourself be loved,” he said.

“And I see now, with Evangeline and my father, to us, that her words were never truer.”

“Your mother was a wise woman. I wish I could have met her,” she said.

“I do, too. I think you would have enjoyed each other,” he replied.

That warm and comfortable silence descended over them once more and Edgar just soaked it in. He’d never felt happier in all his life, and he was amazed at how much good had come out of something so bad.

But he wasn’t one to question it. He had everything he wanted in life—a good woman, a good home, a loving family, and a ranch that was on its way back to being successful again.

Life was not just good, life was great. And though they’d arrived here through the most unconventional of means, Edgar didn’t care. All that mattered to him was that they’d gotten there.

He was happy because he loved and let himself be loved in return. And that was enough for him.

Extended Epilogue

Five Years Later...

“I’ve got to say, you have come a long way, Leah,” Amon said with a laugh. “Do you remember that first day when you tried to feed us

toast and an apple?”

“Oh, I remember,” she replied and shook her head.

Leah’s cheeks flushed but she had to laugh. It wasn’t the best memory simply because she remembered how angry Amon had been with her.

But he wasn’t talking about that. He was simply showing her how much had changed from that first day. And he was right.

Everything had changed. It was hard for her to even remember there had been a time when toast and apple slices were all she could afford to feed her little sister.

Those had been difficult, dark days. But all of that had changed simply because she’d had the courage to answer an ad in a catalog. Her entire life was different. It was happy.

Even Evangeline, who was fourteen now, was sprouting into a beautiful young woman. Strong, intelligent, she had grown into the same sharp-tongued wit favored by Amon.

She had taken on many of his personality traits, as scary as that had been to contemplate once upon a time. But the bond of affection between the two couldn’t be denied.

“And I seem to recall you threw a temper tantrum that would rival any of those thrown by Mary and Elizabeth,” Edgar said, motioning to their twin daughters who sat at the table looking ready to eat.

Amon laughed. “Yes, I was young and dumb once.”

“Well, you’re half right about that,” Evangeline said with a sly

smile. “But I don’t ever recall you being young.”

Everybody at the table had a good laugh at Amon’s expense. He, too, laughed and ruffled Evangeline’s hair, knowing she’d gotten him good.

“You’ve got quite the lip on you, kid,” he said.

“And who do you think she got that from, Pa?”

Amon chuckled and waved Edgar off. Leah checked on their twins, making sure they were eating.

It was a Sunday morning and she’d laid out a big spread for them. Pancakes, eggs, fried potatoes, bacon, homemade biscuits and jam —Leah had gone all out.

She’d even made a cake for them to enjoy a little bit later.

“So, what’s the occasion?” Evangeline asked.

“No reason.” Leah shrugged. “I just wanted to show my appreciation for our family.”

“Well, if you’re going to feed us like this, you’re free to appreciate us every day,” Evangeline quipped, earning a laugh from everybody at the table.

“I second that,” Amon said.

Leah’s gaze fell upon her husband, and she felt a catch in her heart. She marveled that even after all these years together, he could still have that kind of effect on her.

It was what told her that what they had was special. Theirs was the kind of love the bards and poets of old used to sing and write about.

The depth of her love for him knew no bounds, and she could tell by the way he looked at her that Edgar felt the same way.

“All right, well, dig in, everybody,” Leah announced.

“Don’t need to tell us twice,” Amon said as he and Evangeline attacked the platters of food with a vengeance.

They all tucked into their meal and Leah looked around the table, unable to keep the smile off her face. The room was filled with talking and laughter, stories being shared, and the bonds between them growing stronger.

Leah looked to the twins, who were giggling and babbling along with everybody else, and she felt her heart swell until it seemed too big for her chest. Edgar reached over and took her hand, giving her a warm smile when she looked up.

“What are you thinkin’?” he asked.

“That I never imagined I could be this happy.”

“That makes two of us,” he said.

“Are you going to teach me how to herd cattle today, Grandpa?” Evangeline asked.

Amon smiled at her. But then he got to his feet and headed for the door as Evangeline watched him with her head cocked and an expression of confusion on her face.

“Sure, I’ll teach you,” Amon called over his shoulder. “If you can beat me to the barn.”

The door slammed behind him as he took off running and Evangeline squealed as she jumped up and sprinted out of the room. Leah and Edgar shared a look and a laugh.

“Since nobody else had the good manners to say it, breakfast was amazing,” he said. “Thank you for putting this all together for us.”

“You’re very welcome,” she replied. “I enjoy having everybody at the table for a meal.”

“Me, too.”

They both stood up and each of them picked up one of the twins. They carried them out to the front porch and held them as they watched Amon and Evangeline on horseback in the yard, Amon teaching her how to herd cattle.

Mary squirmed in her arms and giggled when Leah made a face at her. Leah laughed and kissed her little girl on the forehead.

After her parents died, Leah had imagined that her life would be nothing but long shifts at the factory and barely scraping by. Barely being able to feed herself, let alone take care of Evangeline.

She had assumed that life was going to be a struggle. An endless string of hardship and misery.

She’d never imagined, not in her wildest dreams, that she would ever truly know happiness. That she would ever truly know love.

But there she was, living a life she’d never been able to imagine

back in Boston. Their ranch was one of the most successful in all of Colorado and they'd had to expand several times as well as bring on more help.

The business was growing almost as quickly as their family. It was still hard, exhausting work. But it was also satisfying.

She was helping grow the ranch with her own two hands and it filled her with a sense of pride and purpose she'd never known before.

She looked over at Edgar and smiled. "Did you ever think life would turn out to be so... perfect?"

"Never," he said. "I never dared dream I'd have such an amazing life."

"It's funny how things work out," she said.

"Funny and yet amazing and wonderful at the same time."

"You took the words right out of my mouth," she replied.

They turned and watched Evangeline and Amon out in the yard again. The sun rained down on them and the sky was azure and beautiful.

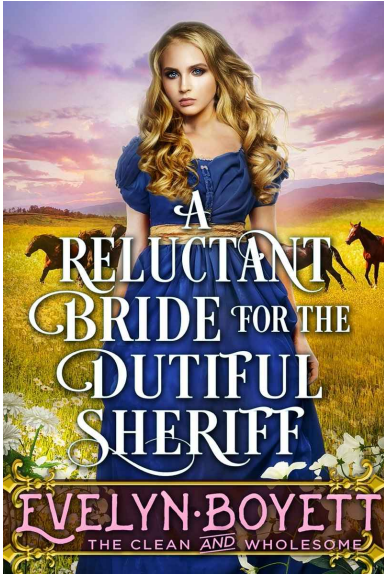
Leah let out a long, satisfied breath and smiled, enjoying the splendor of the day, the land around them, and their love. Things may not have started on the most conventional footing, but they'd worked hard to get to where they were.

They were both in love and they both allowed themselves to be loved. Which, according to Edgar's mother, was the definition of

true happiness.

And Leah couldn't disagree with that.

A Reluctant Bride for the Dutiful Sheriff



Chapter 1

J*une, 1885*

Mabel Adams sat at her kitchen table, holding a cup of coffee in her hands. An empty plate sat beside her, with the bits of eggs and pancakes left of her breakfast.

She took a sip and hoped the caffeine would wake her up enough so that she could begin the long day ahead of her. The rooster in the chicken coop was already calling, letting whoever could hear him know that the sun was rising in the east.

She wished she could crawl back into her bed and sleep, at least for a few more hours. She had only gotten four hours of sleep, having spent most of the night helping one of their cows bring a calf into the world.

It had been a hard birth, and for a while there, Mabel had been afraid she was going to lose both of them. In the end, both mama and baby had been left resting comfortably in a warm stall in the barn.

Setting the cup aside, Mabel finished the last few bites of her breakfast, then stood up and placed the dishes into the sink. She picked up her coffee and took another sip, looking out the dingy

kitchen window.

The sun had risen enough for her to see the ranch and she had to force herself to not feel depressed at the ramshackle surroundings.

She could still remember the first time she had seen this ranch. Eight-year-old Mabel had been so excited to finally not be living with her mother in the small room above the saloon.

Here, she could move around whenever she wanted, inside the small house and outside. She loved being able to breathe fresh air instead of the stale, tobacco-filled air in the saloon.

In a matter of a few months, Mabel had grown from a scrawny girl to a robust, tanned child.

But now, fourteen years later, there were definite signs that the ranch was falling apart.

From where she stood, she could see the chicken coop from where she stood, which looked like a strong wind could knock it over. The shed that held most of the ranch's tools stood next to the coop, and it wasn't in any better condition.

Even though Mabel couldn't see the barn, since it sat a few hundred yards behind the house, she knew it also needed to be replaced.

But all of these repairs would cost money—funds that she didn't have.

At least they owned the land free and clear. No one could take this small piece of Wyoming away from them.

From the window, she could also see the large vegetable garden her mother had tended faithfully before her death, which made Mabel feel even more depressed.

Though she had planted the usual amount of vegetables, potatoes, and other produce that spring, it wasn't doing well. She just didn't have the time to take care of it properly.

Turning away from the window, she swallowed the last of her coffee and placed the cup into the sink. She pulled on her boots and warm jacket, knowing she wouldn't need it as the sun warmed up the air since it was already the end of June.

At the moment, it was still cold enough outside to need it.

She went into the living room to get the work gloves that she had left on a table the night before and saw her father sprawled out on the couch. Mabel frowned.

When she had finally gone to bed at two in the morning, he hadn't been home. She had felt concerned about where he could be, but had been too tired to think about searching for him.

She now knew exactly where her father had been the night before.

While Mabel had been fighting for the life of the cow and calf, he was in the Red Rock Saloon, spending her hard-earned money on drinking and cards.

He had obviously run out of coins because he was now passed out on the sofa. Part of her wanted to stomp over and force her father awake.

Why should she have to take care of everything around here? Why

couldn't he be the man he had been when her mother had married him?

But Mabel knew from experience that attempting to wake him would be useless. He would either not wake up at all or wake up angry and swinging.

It was best to just leave him alone.

"I should be used to this," she murmured. She had been putting in long days on the farm since her mother had died two years ago.

If it wasn't for her, they would have lost the farm long ago.

Not wanting to think about her mother right then, Mabel went into the barn to check on the cow and her calf. She smiled when she saw they were both doing well.

The calf was asleep curled up on the clean hay while its mama contentedly chewed her cud.

"I'll let you out in the field in a few hours, when your baby is stronger," Mabel promised them.

She milked their dairy cow, Betsy, periodically giving their three barn cats squirts of milk for their breakfast. She was glad the cats wanted it, since they rarely used all the milk Betsy gave.

After feeding the chickens and letting their two mares into a nearby field to stretch, she decided to spend a few hours weeding the vegetable garden.

Tears pricked her eyes as she looked at the half-acre of growing plants. When her mother had been alive, at this time of the year,

the plants would be twice the size they were now.

Mabel had wanted to plant another half-acre, but their plow had broken. Over the last few weeks, she had been trying to scrape enough together money to purchase a new one.

A few days ago, the money had disappeared from the hiding place in her room.

Pa had taken it, and Mabel knew without asking him that every penny was now gone. If she wanted to plant more vegetables, she would have to turn the ground by hand with a shovel.

Didn't Pa realize that the plow would have made her life easier? That they needed the garden to get through the winter?

Since there wasn't anything she could do with the garden right then, she turned her back on it and decided to check the fences.

This chore was something she tried to do every month, and it was one job she actually enjoyed since she could spend most of her time on the back of her favorite horse, Trixie.

Pa had given the mare to Mabel when she turned fourteen. She had spent hours training Trixie and they now worked well together.

It didn't take her long to saddle Trixie and she was soon on her way to the farthest field. Their ranch wasn't very large, only about fifteen acres, but it was enough to support her and Pa.

They raised about fifty head of cattle. Many were sold to slaughter businesses back east, but they did keep a few for meat for themselves, and also sold some to nearby towns.

They had a few fields of hay that fed their animals, and made most of their money raising riding horses and then selling them to a nearby army fort. At the moment, they had two geldings almost ready to sell.

Mabel figured they'd be ready in another month, but now she wondered if she would need to sell at least one of them early, even though he wasn't quite ready.

She really needed to buy a plow.

If she did sell the horse, this time she wouldn't bring the money home. She would go directly to the store in town and order the plow before her father got his hands on it.

Thoughts of her father made Mabel think back over her life. Her earliest memory was living in the small room above the saloon where her mother worked as a barmaid.

She gave customers drinks, washed dirty glasses, and helped keep the downstairs clean. Mabel remembered many evenings sitting on their only bed, watching her mother get ready for the evening.

She would put on a red satin dress layered with beautiful lace and ribbons. Her lips would be painted almost the exact color of her dress, and she styled her dark brown hair into a fancy updo.

When she was a small girl, Mabel remembered thinking that her mother was the most beautiful woman in the world.

At the time, she wasn't aware of what her mother's job really entailed. All she knew was that when her mother left their room, Mabel was expected to be very quiet, and that her mother would be gone all night.

She had hated it when she was left alone and would sometimes sneak out of their room to watch the people who visited the saloon on the main floor, hiding in a small crook at the top of the stairs.

When she grew tired, she would go back to their room and sleep. In the morning, she would wake up next to her mother, who would be sound asleep.

Mabel had learned early on how to take care of herself. She would eat the food her mother had left for her on a plate and then dress herself.

She had to be quiet while her mother slept for most of the day. Even though it had been hard for her to be so quiet, it was the only life she knew. It was normal for her.

Then, when she turned eight, things changed. Her mother had gotten sick and the owner of the saloon threatened to force them out into the street.

It was then that a local rancher, Chris Adams, had heard of her mother's plight and offered to marry her.

The changes had happened so fast. One day, her mother could barely get out of bed, and the next they had moved to this ranch.

Her mother had gotten better, and the next few years were some of Mabel's best. Mr. Adams had insisted Mabel call him Pa, which her mother had encouraged.

"There is a chance Mr. Adams is your real Pa, and since we're now married, he's the only father you will know," her mother had told her once. "He deserves your respect."

Even though Mabel hadn't fully understood her mother's claim that Mr. Adams could be her real father, she hadn't minded calling him Pa since she had always wanted one.

She had spent long hours looking out the window of their small room above the saloon, watching other children pass in the streets with their parents.

One time, she saw a tall man pick up his son and carry him on his shoulders. Another time, she watched a man holding a little girl's hand, complimenting her on the pretty blue dress she wore.

She had even pretended occasionally that her own father would someday show up.

Her mother had allowed her to attend Willow Creek's school when she turned six.

She remembered being so excited to finally not have to spend all of her time shut up indoors. Maybe she could make a friend and she would be able to learn to read.

Even though she had loved school, the children didn't treat her well because of who her mother was and the fact that she didn't have a father.

After her mother had married Mr. Adams, she'd hoped the people in town would start treating them better, since her mother no longer worked in the saloon and was properly married to a good man.

But Mabel had quickly learned that people had long memories.

They had been living on the ranch for ten years when her mother

had gotten sick again. Only this time, she never recovered, although it had taken a few years for her to die.

Things changed drastically after her mother's death. Pa had taken her death hard and began to spend more and more time in town, leaving Mabel to take care of things around the farm.

While she was glad they still had the ranch, she worked harder than any man she knew.

It took Mabel longer than she expected to check the fences, mainly because she had to stop to repair a large hole or weak posts three different times.

She spent the rest of the day working with one of the horses, hoping she could get him ready to sell to the army sooner rather than later.

After a long day's work, she finally was done with chores for the day and headed inside. She was glad to see Pa awake and sitting at the table.

Throughout the day, she had thought deeply of what she could say to him to try to get him to change.

"Hi," she tried to greet him cheerfully, but he only grunted. "Do you think you can take care of the evening chores while I get dinner on?"

This time, Pa didn't even respond, and Mabel grew angry. She stomped over to the table and pulled out a chair to sit on. Maybe it was time she had a frank talk with him.

She understood that he desperately missed her mother, but he

wasn't the only one who wished things were different.

She had to somehow get him to see that his actions were not only destroying himself, but it was affecting her as well as their livelihood.

"Pa, we need to talk." She paused for a moment, hoping for a positive response, but he just grunted again.

"I know you found the money I hid," she said. "I was saving up for a new plow."

"What's wrong with the one we have?" he muttered.

"It broke when I tried to plow the north field for hay. Don't you remember?"

Pa shrugged. "We can get by without one."

Mabel stared at him incredulously. "Pa, we need a plow to get the ground ready to plant more vegetables. We also need—"

Pa waved a beefy hand in the air, interrupting her. "Just save up for another one."

"I need a plow within the next few weeks. It will take longer than that to get the money." She paused. "I noticed that you took all of it. Did you spend it all?"

This time, Pa glared at her. "I don't like the way you're talking to me. You need to remember your place. I didn't have to keep you around after Priscilla died."

This was a regular threat, but one Mabel didn't worry much about.

If Pa forced her to leave, he wouldn't have anyone to do all the work around the ranch.

Instead of responding, Mabel stood and opened the pantry. After taking out some potatoes, carrots, and onions, she began to wash them using the water that came out of the pump into the sink.

In silence, she sliced the vegetables while a cast iron pan heated on the stove. This was a meal she made almost every day—it was fast and nourishing.

She cut thick slices of bacon to fry in the pan, then added the chopped vegetables. Hearing movement behind her, she turned to see her father trying to shove his feet into his boots.

“Where are you going?” she asked, though she knew exactly where he was heading.

“I don't need to stick around and listen to you lecture me. I'm a grown man.”

Mabel sighed. “At least eat before you leave.”

Pa paused before giving a short nod, acting like he was doing her a favor. When the food was done, she filled up a plate and placed it in front of Pa, and it didn't take him long to eat every bite.

Without another word, he disappeared out the door. But she couldn't help but yell after him, just before the door shut behind him, “Don't spend all our money!”

The door slammed shut on her last words, and she stared at it for a long moment before collapsing in a chair. She buried her face in her hands, doing her best to keep the tears from falling.

What was her future going to be like if Pa kept on the path he was on?

If you enjoy reading this first chapter, grab the full book using this [link](#).